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The Immortal Refugee Child

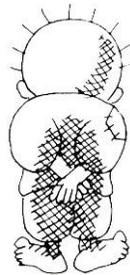


Figure 1: Handala (“Handala”)

The day of the Nakba (“the catastrophe”) is the commemoration of the forced expulsion of the Palestinian people and of the loss of their homeland (Al-Jazeera). After they became refugees, many Palestinians used art to resist the Israeli settler colonization and to keep the memory of their stolen homeland close. One Palestinian refugee, Naji al-Ali, became a political cartoonist and used his drawings to resist the Israeli occupation of Palestine. When Naji al-Ali was ten years old, he and his family emigrated from Al-Shajara, his hometown, to the Ain El Helwa refugee camp in Lebanon (al-Ali). His most iconic creation was that of the little refugee child he named “Handala,” which he would publish in all his cartoons in mainstream newspapers (Sacco). As seen in Figure 1, Handala is a cartoon with spiky hair, a tattered shirt that has a patch in it, baggy pants, and no shoes. Every cartoon Naji al-Ali drew included the image of Handala watching the scene in front of him with his hands behind his back. However, Handala’s face is never revealed; Handala sees what the newspaper viewers see. Handala watches every refugee

and every corrupt leader silently. There are many other recurring symbols in all of the scenes al-Ali depicts, including Fatima, Al-Zalama (the man), the overweight rich corrupt men, the key to the homeland, the flower, the United States, Israel, Christian symbols, and Muslim symbols. Many scholars, like Tahrir Hamdi, believe that Handala resists the erasure of Israeli colonialism by bearing witness to all the corruption, and by keeping the memory and history of Palestine alive (25). Other scholars like Orayb Aref Najjar believe that his art helped create a Palestinian identity. Drawing upon the work of Hamdi and Najjar, I will argue that Naji al-Ali's work serves the dual function of providing an explicit political response to who and what is to blame for the Nakba and giving an icon of Palestine's resistance, thereby enabling the diaspora to keep their memories of their homeland close to them.

Naji al-Ali himself says that he drew Handala to keep the memory of his homeland close to him, and therefore, through this icon he works to remember his Palestinian identity. In an interview with writer and Professor of Literature Radha Ashour, Naji al-Ali explained that while he was in Ain El-Helwa refugee camp and when he began drawing political cartoons, he made Handala to be an extension of himself (al-Ali). He introduced Handala with the statement, "I am Hanzala from the Ain Al-Helwa camp. I give my word of honour that I'll remain loyal to the cause..."(al-Ali). Naji al-Ali then says that Handala is ten years old- just as old as he was when he became a refugee, and that Handala will not grow older than ten until he is able to return home (al-Ali). He saw Handala as representing his own childhood (al-Ali). He never allowed himself to forget where he came from, even though his family had to leave when he was so young. Therefore, he never allowed the colonizers of his country to strip him of his individual identity, which is part of the reason why he gave his icon one individual identity as well.

Naji al-Ali's image is so powerful because he makes Handala one individual and a child. It allows others to put themselves in the child's shoes; because after all, they see what he sees. They cannot see his face, but they can experience these scenes with him. By representing himself, Al-Ali is also able to represent the experiences of other Palestinian refugees. Although Handala is an extension of al-Ali, he remains faceless in order to represent all Palestinians and the Palestinian cause. Palestinians resist by remembering and reminding others of their history. Naji al-Ali felt that it was necessary to give his people a voice and to be a source of truth; that it was his responsibility. By telling the untold stories of his homeland, and the untold stories of other refugees, he was helping maintain the Palestinian identity despite the colonizer's attempts to erase it. In addition, there was power in making Handala a refugee child. By creating a child that is suffering quietly and patiently, it also creates an emotional response. People use their politics to judge adults, but not children. With children, people just see the suffering. Therefore, Handala humanizes the Palestinian struggle to outside viewers.



Figure 2: Drums of War (“Handala”)

To further show the effects of the occupation on refugees, Al-Ali uses the image of barrels of oil to critique Israeli and American exploitation of Palestinian natural resources.

“Al-Nakba” as noted previously, marks the beginning of Israel’s project of ethnically cleansing

the Palestinian people from their homeland. Subsequently, hundreds of thousands became refugees once the occupation of Palestine began (Al-Jazeera). They created settlements on Palestinian land and took ownership of their homes (Al-Jazeera). However, Naji al-Ali argued that there was more to the creation of Israel than simply creating a Jewish state. This is exemplified in his cartoon “Drums of War” (Figure 2), in which he made an image with a Palestinian man and Handala reading a newspaper (“Handala”). As seen in Figure 2, two soldiers, one with “US” written on his cap, and another with the Star of David on his cap (representing the Israeli flag) are shown in the foreground smiling and beating on barrels of oil (“Handala”). Al-Ali argued that, in fact, the reason America supported the creation of Israel, and the reason the state of Israel was created was so that they could exploit the land and its resources. The image specifically shows oil because of its major economic impact in the Middle East, and because it has drawn empires to the Middle East to take advantage of it. It was the oil and the profit that sparked the interest of the Israeli and American governments. In his book, “Fateful Triangle, the United States, Israel, and the Palestinians,” Noam Chomsky describes how, “It is the Palestinians who have been consistently sold out in the U.S....in favor of a militarized Israel that will serve the U.S. interest of controlling the petroleum reserves of the Middle East” (44). In other words, it was the United States’ goal to make more profit from oil reserves in Palestine, and that is a major reason why they supported Israel in 1948, and why they continue to support Israel today. It was in the United States’ best interest to help Israel, and to force Palestinians out of their land.

In this same image, Naji al-Ali exposes how America benefits from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because of its military industrial complex. Drawing on Chomsky’s idea of America

creating a “militarized Israel”, America profited from aiding Israel militarily (44). As the United States helped Israel occupy Palestine, it also grew its military industrial complex. It profited off the sale of weapons and Israel profited off of the use of those weapons in the occupation. Today, Israel is “one of the top 10 exporters of arms...This is due to the prolonged US-Israeli military, technological, and scientific collaboration, Israeli firms’ access to modern US technologies, [and] long-term US financial aid to Israel’s civilian and defense economies” (Deiss, Watson).

Figure 2 shows this alliance between the United States and Israel and exposes what this alliance means economically and politically. Because the title of the newspaper in the image translates to “Drums of War” and because the United States is also beating on these drums (not just Israel), al-Ali is showing how the United States is involved, not just in the petroleum business, but also in the business of war. In fact, in 2016 alone, the United States gave Israel \$38 billion “to renew Israel’s arsenal of weaponry” (Tolan). Israel and America were working together to get control of resources in the Middle East and ultimately to gain profit at the time of the occupation, and this weapon industry is still going on today. Therefore, al-Ali was exposing how a large cause of the loss of Palestine and the forced removal of Palestinians was money; it was economically advantageous for these colonizing countries. Therefore, by bringing the truth of why Palestinians, like himself, became refugees, al-Ali was staying true to the promise he made to stay loyal to the cause of Palestine. He helped his audience understand the true history of his country, and by keeping this history alive, he helped Palestinians hold onto their identities, their memories of home, and their hopes of returning.

Naji al-Ali uses the symbol of Fatima and the key to argue that Palestinians have a right to return to their homeland but that they are losing hope of returning. As shown in Figure 3,

Fatima is a Palestinian woman who wears a thobe, a traditional Palestinian dress. According to lecturer Fayeq Oweis, Fatima is always shown holding a house key and she has “her roots in the land of Palestine”(23). These ideas were very rebellious because al-Ali was arguing for Palestinians’ right of return which is symbolized by how Palestinians hold the key to Palestine (Oweis 23). Hamdi and Oweis’s argument can also be extended to show that the Israelis who entered the land, entered without a key. In other words, al-Ali was trying to show how Israelis stole this land. In addition, Fatima also represents an active resistor in the fight against the occupation (Hamdi 27). In reality, several Palestinian women were actively resistant to the oppression just like Fatima is in these images (Hamdi 27). Although she is a strong resistor, Fatima also represents the loss of hope that many of these Palestinians experienced. Even though she is sometimes shown fighting and planting flowers as a form of resistance, in other images, like Figure 3, she is shown crying and staring at an image of her country (“Handala”). She holds the key, but the key has no power anymore. She can argue for her right to the land, but she realizes that she may never return.



Figure 3: Fatima and the Key (“Handala”)



Figure 4: Fatima farming (“Handala”)

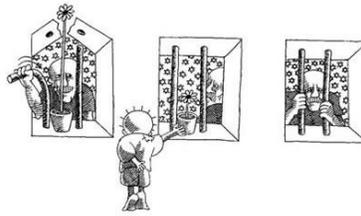


Figure 5: Flowers breaking open prison (“Handala”)

The flower and plants in general represent the fact that Palestinians were a natural part of that land, that Palestinians were stopped from cultivating the land, and that there was a destruction of nature in Palestine because of imperialism. Fatima and Handala are shown holding or planting flowers because they are using what is natural to fight corruption. Figure 5, for example, shows Handala putting a flower pot in front of prison bars, and the flower breaks open the prison window, freeing Al-Zalamah (“Handala”). Jonathan P. Wurth, wrote that “In arid places and in war zones [the flowers] are miraculous, representing life among the dead” (51). Although this is true, Naji al-Ali mainly put images of flowers to show that the Israeli occupation was not natural; that not only were the people being hurt by the occupation, but that the land itself was being destroyed. Naji al-Ali fights the occupation in many different scenes by bringing back nature, and in these scenes, he is trying to restore natural order. Hamdi also touches on this idea when she analyzes Figure 4, the image of Fatima plowing dry cracked soil using a gun, and then planting hearts into the cracks to grow plants that resemble the Palestinian flag (“Handala”). Hamdi says that, “The implication here is that the land will not be lovingly looked after by its new owners, who will not tend Palestine’s fertile orchards with the same level of care as its uprooted peasant population” (28). Al-Ali’s image is referring to how Palestine is very fertile, and the colonists of the land have ruined what is natural through their imperialism. The

Palestinian people are the only people who have the power to return the land to the way it was before, because they are the only people who do not exploit the land, but rather take care of it. Part of Palestinian identity is in their identification with this land. However, through the occupation, the Israeli government tries to separate Palestinians from their land and tries to stop them from cultivating the land. The destruction of nature and the ruins of the Israeli and American empires make it more clear that this land belongs to and responds only to Palestinians.

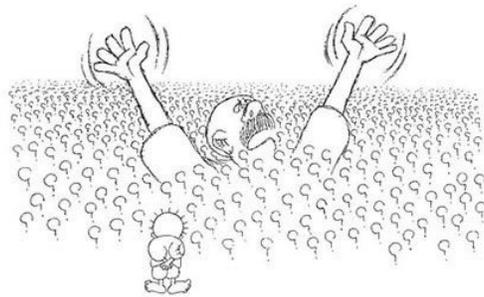


Figure 6: Al-Zalamah (“Handala”)

Al-Zalamah is a refugee who is an impoverished freedom fighter and Naji al-Ali uses him to demonstrate the feelings of disillusionment that rise for many Palestinian men as they fight for their country. Al-Zalamah represents the need Palestinians have for basic necessities, which is why al-Ali makes him very thin. In Figure 6, the refugee is wailing and drowning in a field of question marks (“Handala”). This represents the disillusionment of fighting with no end result, of losing one’s homeland and possessions, of having to live in poverty, and of not understanding why this all has to happen. According to Oreyb Aref Najjar, al-Zalamah “appears to be everyman. He is depicted as a poor refugee who reacts to what happens around him” (270). Al-Zalamah represents the feelings and reactions of the common Palestinian refugees. In

different images al-Ali has made, al-Zalamah has experienced torture, has seen hypocrisy, and has felt the negative effects of inequality (“Handala”). He feels confused, disappointed, and hopeless about his situation, and he sees no end to his suffering. By depicting what many refugees experience, al-Ali promoted a feeling of solidarity among the refugees and a common identity that did not erase their individuality, but rather brought their individual lives and experiences to light. As their histories were being forcibly erased, this image of al-Zalamah prevented anyone seeing these cartoons from ignoring the suffering of Palestinians or from forgetting about it. This history is real and it deserves to be acknowledged.



Figure 7: Corrupt Arabs (“Handala”)

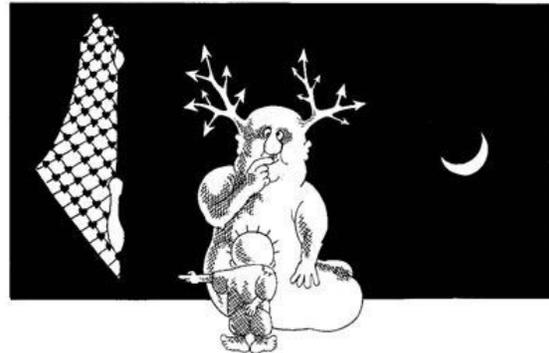


Figure 8: Arab Regimes (“Handala”)

Al-Ali separated Palestinian refugees like Al-Zalamah from other corrupt Arabs to remind his audience of their hypocrisy and of the fact that they are hurting their own people in this struggle. In Figure 7, Naji al-Ali humorously depicts a man as a rich blob-like person. He does this in order to criticize the wealthy corrupt Arabs who eat, enjoy their lives, and do nothing for the Palestinian cause. Oweis describes this man as “the evil man[,] the oppressor” who “takes advantage of the resistance” and works for Israel and America (29). This can be seen in the scene in Figure 7, in which the rich overweight Palestinian man with a business hat and a briefcase is

running away and laughing at a Palestinian freedom fighter (“Handala”). Najjar explains that this “Westernized Palestinian businessman...distances himself from refugee concerns”(275). Najjar is referring to how Palestinians who do not live in refugee camps forget their identities and stay away from the politics of their country. They are capitalists just like their Western oppressors, and they prevent Palestinian refugees from ever returning to their homeland. Al-Ali exaggerates their figures, depicting them as overweight, to symbolize their greed, hunger for power, and selfish interest. Naji al-Ali criticizes the fact that it is the oppressor and other Palestinians’ fault that so many displaced Palestinian refugees can never return home. The Palestinian people are also to blame for being complicit with their oppression. Al-Ali is trying to help Palestinians remember their identities and to make them realize their hypocrisy. Some Palestinians who are not refugees live comfortably but they ignore what is happening to the rest of their people. He is reminding them of their duty to their country; if they do not stand in solidarity, there is no hope for their situation to improve.

Al-Ali also exemplifies this duty to Palestine and other Arabs’ lack of loyalty to the cause by depicting Arab regimes of other countries as rich blob-like men. In various images, he depicts them as lacking knowledge and as not understanding what to do in different political situations. One example is Figure 8, an image in which there is a blob-like man who represents Arab regimes (“Handala”). He has arrows coming out of his head that point in different directions, and Handala points towards Palestine (“Handala”). Handala has to tell the man where his loyalty should lie. Al-Ali is showing how Arab regimes make important decisions on Palestine, their decisions affect the Palestinian people, but at the same time, they do not even understand what they are doing. For example, the leaders of the Hashemite kingdom, Faisal, Abdullah, and Sharif

of Mecca Hussein ibn Ali supported the Balfour Declaration in 1917 (Karsh). This declaration was created by the British government, and it allowed for the “establishment of a Jewish national home” through the takeover of Palestinians’ homeland (Karsh). So much of the history of Palestine has to do with how other Arab countries have responded to the occupation and how they have supported it. Part of resisting the injustices that have befallen the Palestinian people has to do with bringing these injustices to the public eye, which is exactly what Naji al-Ali did.



Figure 9: Christian symbols (“Handala”) Figure 10: Muslims at Hajj (Najjar, 273)

Al-Ali frames his critique within Abrahamic religions to emphasize the suffering Palestinians experience. As shown in Figure 9, Naji al-Ali related the experiences of Palestinian refugees to the crucifixion of Christ. Najjar cited an interview in which a Palestinian said that he and other Palestinians felt like they suffered like Jesus (271). Palestinians are beaten ““by the hands of the world, they crucify our [(the Palestinian)] people, they insult us, but we refuse to surrender’ (Strindberg, 2004, p.1)”, and this strength is a part of the Palestinian identity (Najjar 271). By Palestinian identity, Najjar is referring to how Palestinians do not give up in their struggle. Although they get betrayed by other Arab regimes, by the Israeli government, and by Israel’s Western supporting governments, they do not stop resisting. Just like Christ, the martyrs are innocent people who have died of no fault of their own, and the sacrifice they made will not

be forgotten. According to Professor Laleh Khalili, nations put power and significance in death, and “often the state ‘captures’ and transforms their deaths into willing sacrifices for their nation”(2). Death is often glorified or used to create a better understanding of the history of a nation. Naji al-Ali uses the same method Khalili sees with the creation of monuments and cemeteries, to remind his audience of the histories of those who died or those who are currently being hurt by the occupation. Before there was a glorification of Christ and a coming to light of the truth of his story, he was tortured just like Palestinians. The majority of Palestinians are Muslim and Christian, and Naji al-Ali draws symbols for both religions to represent their solidarity; to show the world that they are one people.

Muslim symbols, such as the crescent moon, are used to remind Palestinians that they are not the only witnesses of their suffering. Just as they bear witness to corruption and cruelty of other regimes, they are never alone in their struggle. As Handala silently watches the scene above him, there is the symbol of the crescent moon that sees everything below. In Figure 10, for example, there is an image of Al-Zalamah going to the Mecca pilgrimage wearing black, and many evil blob-like men who are surrounding him are wearing white (“Handala”). In the pilgrimage in Mecca, Muslims are supposed to wear white. Najjar argues that by making the refugee wear black, Naji al-Ali shows how there is a lot of inequality among the Arab people and how the refugee has other worries that the rich overweight men do not have (274). In a holy place, where all are, hypothetically speaking, supposed to be equal, the refugee’s “emaciated body tells another story”(Najjar 274). However, Najjar did not mention the significance of the crescent moon in the background. Naji al-Ali drew this to show that as Muslims create inequalities among each other, God sees the refugees’ suffering, and he sees what injustices the

impoverished refugee has to face. Their injustices and hypocrisy have been seen and witnessed by God Himself. Therefore, despite their mistreatment, Palestinians are never completely alone. This is al-Ali's reminder that there is also hope in their struggle. It is possible, however, that the crescent moon does not have a religious meaning. Even if it does not, it is still the only witness, other than Handala, that sees the corruption in the scene. What is natural and truthful is a witness of what has been corrupted by imperialism. The crescent moon is the only source of light in the image, and it is literally and figuratively bringing to light the corruption it witnesses. Therefore, nature could be serving the same purpose as God and is giving Palestinians a voice despite their oppression.

Handala was present in every image mentioned above as well as every single image Naji al-Ali created, because Handala is the ultimate representation of Palestinian resistance. In every scene described above, whether it was of a displaced Palestinian refugee, or of a blob-like evil man who could not identify with Palestinians, Handala, a child, was quietly watching. He always had his back turned to al-Ali's audience, and he saw everything the audience saw in the scenes al-Ali had drawn. These scenes maintained the history and identity of the Palestinian people as they were erased from their land. Hamdi emphasizes this by stating that "Bearing witness, then, is a writing back into history of what has been deliberately erased" (24). It is the very act of watching and witnessing an act of corruption that is itself a form of resistance, because the story lives on through the witness. In that way, Handala forces the story of Palestine and of Palestinian refugees to always be remembered by the world. The history of Palestine lives through him. Hamdi also sees "sumud or steadfastness under the most difficult conditions" as a recurring symbol in al-Ali's work (26). To extend her argument, Handala gave Palestinians a voice despite

their forced silence. He drew what Palestinians saw and what they could not say. Palestinians were not given a choice in their forced expulsion. He represented patience and silent resistance, which is also why we cannot see his face. According to Marianne Maurice Marar, the fact that he does not show his face could actually be from only our perspective, that “we turned our back from him so the collective guilt of having to look in his eyes no longer haunts us” (215). Marar is saying that maybe “we”, the audience, can never see his face because we are corrupt. In reality, it is not clear why we cannot see his face, or what his face actually looks like, but it is clear that the way he stands is an act of resistance that will last until Palestine is freed from the occupation and possibly afterwards.

The image of Handala was so powerful that it evolved to represent the Palestinian struggle as a whole, thereby making Handala the immortal child of Palestine. Naji al-Ali knew that he would eventually be silenced; he called himself “a marked man” (Mandell 26). He knew that his work was so radical and powerful, that it was too much of a threat to continue. What he did not realize, however, was that the image of Handala would stay alive long past him. Today, Handala, “continues to stand witness to the Palestinian predicament on T-shirts, key chains, postcards, cigarette lighters, and other souvenir items” (Khalili 11). He is everywhere and he cannot be silenced. His existence not only keeps Palestinian history alive, but it also reinforces what it means to be Palestinian. It keeps the Palestinian identity and the Palestinian homeland a reality. As Handala lives on eternally, so does the resistance.

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