
REVIEWED BY AHMAD DIAB

The question of Palestinian identity has garnered great interest for a very long time now. Many scholars and writers have tended to this question in a variety of media and across many disciplines, both within and outside an academic purview. Some have presented a historical assessment of the development of Palestinian nationalism, while others have focused on the cultural and folkloric aspects of identity formation in diasporic and exilic settings. Still more have studied aspects of Palestinian identity in filmic texts. Both within historic Palestine and in the communities of exiles and refugees, the question of Palestinian identity continues to attract attention.

The late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once stated that he had a project to write a book of Genesis that could as well double as a book of Exodus for Palestinians. In Being Palestinian: Personal Reflections on Palestinian Identity in the Diaspora, Yasir Suleiman presents an intimate and polyphonic take on the subject through contributions from over one hundred Palestinians living in the diaspora. Being Palestinian comes close to Darwish’s formulation. The book’s breadth of scope, lucidity of narrative, and mixture of literary registers make it stand out within the rich literature on the subject as a unique multiauthor Palestinian book of genesis/exodus.

The idea for the book arose when the editor solicited reflections on being Palestinian in the diaspora as a way to mitigate a work-related moving decision from Edinburgh to Cambridge. It takes cue from two previous publications: Being Irish: Personal Reflections on Irish Identity Today (Oak Tree Press, 2000) and Being Scottish: Personal Reflections on Scottish Identity Today (Polygon, 2002). Suleiman’s aim is to edit a book of personal reflections, not one of memoirs or one that engages with “formal politics.” Reflections for Suleiman are “not the mirroring of experience but a refraction of it.” Refraction involves “distortions, fracture, and (re)construction without, however, totally losing the connection with its source” (p. 8).

Dedicated to the memory of Edward Said, the book comprises 102 contributions interspersed with a number of photographs. In the editor’s prologue, Suleiman is clear about his project not being an academic book. However, and in keeping with the heterogeneous visions of Palestinian-ness presented in the book, he discusses the meaning of diaspora while offering exile and shatat (diaspora) as other possible terms with relevant descriptive valence in the Palestinian condition. Rather than delving into an academic appreciation of the taxonomy, the editor seamlessly incorporates the contributors’ voices throughout the prologue, marking diaspora, for example, as “an endless absence, time-lapse photography in reverse” (p. 3).
The bulk of the book is its 102 pieces of text. Each piece averages around one thousand words in length and includes a short biographical note with a small photograph of the contributor (except for one anonymous author). Rarely has a book captured the vicissitude of Palestinian identity in exile with such insistence on polyphony and freedom of form. The book counts among its contributors both established and famed writers and scholars, as well as first-time writers. They span three generations of Palestinian exile. Some describe their firsthand experience of the Nakba in 1948, others speak from the vantage point of second or third degrees of generational separation from that totalizing event. Some offer a micro autobiography, others zoom in on a pivotal moment in their life, still others contemplate alternative personal histories. While prose narrative is the dominant format, some accompany their texts with photographs of family members or their artworks, others offer poems, while one contributor describes his first journey to Palestine in the format of a script for a very short play punctuated by repetitions of “time passes” (p. 56). The writers’ associations with Palestine are similarly diverse: they run the gamut of “[being Palestinian] is like being young and in love” (p. 245) to “[Palestine] was the funny names of grandmothers” (p. 162) to “being Palestinian has been interchangeable with being miserable” (p. 221).

**Being Palestinian** provides a great variety of voices, which is the editor’s stated guiding principle for soliciting and accepting contributions. This principle raises the question of the value and the kind of variety present in the book. The reader will find it a variety of a particular kind. It is limited to the anglophone exilic experience mainly in the United Kingdom and North America. Within that circle, the majority of the contributors come from a very well-educated background. It is not entirely clear whether that is a representative sample of the Palestinian anglophone exilic experience, a result of the network of exilic connections that privilege professional ties, or the result of those who responded to the original call to submission. The book could have included translated submissions from Arabic, French, and Spanish diasporas, which would have presented a more comprehensive articulation of being a Palestinian in diaspora.

Given the fragmented nature of diasporas in general, many Palestinians would find this book illuminating, and its variety of narratives make it a great source for non-Palestinians wishing to learn about Palestine and Palestinians.

Ahmad Diab is an assistant professor of modern Arabic literature and Middle Eastern cinema at the University of California, Berkeley.

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REVIEWED BY MICHAEL R. FISCHBACH

The Balfour Declaration famously dismissed 90 percent of Palestine’s population simply as “the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.” These infamous words give expression to a much deeper process of what author Lorenzo Kamel calls the “process of simplification of Palestine and its inhabitants under British influence” (p. 1). *Imperial Perceptions of Palestine* explores the various ways that Britons, Zionists, and others defined—“simplified”—Palestine and its people to