

**Tahrir Hamdi, *Imagining Palestine: Cultures of Exile and National Identity***

LINDSEY MOORE<sup>1</sup>

Department of English Literature & Creative Writing, Lancaster University, Lancaster,  
Lancashire LA1 4YD, UK

Debunking a frequently superficial ‘turn’ in (some) global north institutions that defang systemic and epistemic critique, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang ‘remind readers what is unsettling about decolonization. Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life’ (2012, p. 1). Leading Palestinian literary critic Tahrir Hamdi sounds the same note in *Imagining Palestine: Cultures of Exile and National Identity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2023), warning, in an echo of Mahmoud Darwish’s *In the Presence of Absence (Fi hadrat al-ghiyab, 2006/2011)*, that the ‘the dispossessed [of 1948 Palestine] are preparing for their return’ (p. 1). The book closes with another resounding invocation of ‘*awda*, the names of some who will not now realize a (literal) return – including the author’s late father Khalil Ismail Hamdi and brother Hamdi Khalid Hamdi, to whom the book is dedicated – and a promise ‘[t]o all the martyrs of Palestine [...] to continue the struggle’ (p. 209, p. 211). Its magnificent cover features the colours of the Palestinian flag and a photograph, by Majdi Fathi, of a young woman holding a key, a master signifier ‘represent[ing] the Palestinians’ moral right of return to their homes and lands’ (p. 124). This book believes in ‘the very real possibility’ of the liberation – and repatriation – ‘of the oppressed, colonized, silenced and marginalized peoples of this world’ (p. 103).

*Imagining Palestine*, an avowedly decolonial endeavour, aims to ‘unsettle’ on several levels. Most obviously, it provides a genealogy of Palestinian cultural life as ‘living heritage’ (p. 195) that lays siege to the settler colonial narrative explicitly reiterated in Israel’s 2018 Nation-State (Basic) Law. Moreover – positioning English prose as dissident address rather than dwelling on its structural paradoxes – Hamdi excoriates both the shrinking of Anglophone spaces in which one can speak about Palestine and a compliant and provincial Arab ‘educational system [...] in need of an epistemic revolution’ (p. 39; Hamdi, 2022, p. 212). As a Palestinian who insists upon, and has personally overseen, curriculum transformation in Jordan as well as publishing extensively in Anglophone postcolonial literary fora, Hamdi capitalizes on an insider/outsider positionality that insists upon

irreconcilability, including from sites of relative privilege.<sup>2</sup> To cite other signature terms associated with presiding ghost Edward Said, her relationship to Palestine is both filial and actively affiliative. To continually imagine Palestine is to performatively resist orthodoxy (pp. 98-9), to make trouble (p. 118), to retrieve what is ‘raw’ as well as creatively reconfigured (p. 105), and to project liberation – of minds, lands and homes – as the inevitable outcome of a righteous cause.

Hamdi’s book moves restlessly – again, unsettlingly – between the greats of the Palestinian creative canon (Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, Mourid Barghouti, Naji al-Ali), works of international solidarity (by Radwa Ashour, June Jordan, bell hooks), recent diaspora writing (Susan Abulhawa, Suheir Hammad), graffiti, dance, song, science, interviews with activists and intellectuals, and the *sumud* of global revolutionary icons from Leila Khaled to Mohammed and Mona El-Kurd. The critical mode of procedure is purposively unschematic, redolent of admixture as representative of ‘the Palestinian condition’ (p. 125). As the author articulates it: ‘Imagining a future decolonized Palestinian community/nation is essentially linked to and is, in fact, conditioned upon negotiating an inclusive identity’ (p. 14). To this end, it also mobilizes a range of critical resources from within and beyond interdisciplinary Palestinian studies, capitalizing particularly effectively on Edward Soja’s trialectics of spatiality, historicity and sociality.<sup>3</sup> Hamdi’s conceptual apparatus – encompassing exile, memory, the ongoing *nakba* (catastrophe), literal and metaphorical ‘writings on the wall’, steadfastness, heritage and resistance – supports her core claim: that ‘imagining Palestine’ is ‘a conscious, intentional and continuous effort’ to (re)construct ‘a collective, inclusive, national and cultural identity’ tied to the geography of 1948 Palestine (p. 14).

*Imagining Palestine: Cultures of Exile and National Identity* joins other recent monographs on Palestinian literary and creative visual production, notably Bashir Abu-Manneh’s *The Palestinian Novel* (2015) and Hania Nashef’s *Palestinian Culture and the Nakba* (2019), that begin to compensate for Palestine’s inexplicable absence in a sub-discipline oriented toward colonialism’s afterlives. Like these authors, Hamdi tracks creative production by Palestinians since the 1948 expulsion. Her contribution is, however, distinctive in its intransigent commitment to – citing Leila Khaled – ‘[a]ll forms and means of resistance’ (p. 202, my emphasis). Hamdi aligns with Frantz Fanon and Kanafani in underlining that to resist dispossession, political control, enclosure and memoricide, Palestinians must *fight*, by any means available, to awaken and sustain a secular national culture (pp. 48–49).

If there is a quibble from an editorial point of view, it is that overarching chapter arguments could more explicitly be set up and the selected corpus overtly justified. Chapter Three, for example, ranges across different writerly genres (novels, memoirs, poetry) without pressing on the formal implications of these ways of representing ‘self’ and ‘nation’, including in newer, more speculative modes than are engaged here. Abulhawa is, arguably, a less interesting – if more outspoken – contemporary writer than, say, Adania Shibli. Selections must be made, however, from amongst the exceptional riches of Palestinian creative production, and Hamdi’s capacious book deftly combines canonical and more recent work.

Hamdi’s accessible, passionate engagements with Palestinian culture reach beyond the academy to wider audiences, and the book is strikingly generous in its engagement with non-Palestinian (particularly British) scholars and allies. *Imagining Palestine* is a powerful, often moving contribution both to the fields of post- and decolonial literary scholarship, generally, and to Palestinian studies specifically. ‘It is incumbent upon Arab intellectuals’, its author argues, ‘to provide deep and penetrating analysis [...] regarding the Palestinian struggle, which is [...] deeply intertwined in the dynamics of the region as a whole’ (p. 14). *Imagining Palestine* provides such analysis.

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Author of *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations: Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Before taking up the Directorship of the Arab Open University (Jordan Branch), Hamdi led its English Language and Literature programme.

<sup>2</sup> See Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

#### Works Cited

Abu-Manneh, Bashir (2016). *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 
- Hamdi, Tahrir (2022). 'Decolonizing English Literature Departments at Arab Universities', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 44, 196–214.
- Nashef, Hania (2019). *Palestinian Culture and the Nakba: Bearing Witness*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Soja, Edward (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
- Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1: 1 (2012): 1–40.