



Jenin, Jinan, Junon

Reflections on identity in the Jenin films

Sobhi al-Zobaidi

Three films were made by Israeli-Palestinian filmmakers in the aftermath of Jenin's little war in 2002: *Jenin Jenin* by Mohamed Bakri, *Ijtiyah* by Nizar Hasan and *Arna's Children* by Juliano Mir-Khamis. There are of course other films and reports that were made or are being made, but I want to focus my thoughts on these three films because they are special. They are special in my mind, first of all because they were made by three unique individuals (in terms of identity and identification) and second, because film here is used as a medium for intervention.

Here are three Palestinian-Israelis. Israelis would want me to say Arab-Israelis and Arabs would like me to say Palestinian-Israelis. This last explanation, as insignificant as it may seem, is very telling. It chronicles of identity being made, founded, narrated, erased and imagined. Israelis have gotten used to referring to Palestinians in signs that are devoid of 'Palestine' or anything 'Palestinian'. See the word 'Arabs', for example, which leads past Palestine directly to the surrounding Arab

Jenin camp residents survey the rubble.

countries and the larger Arab world, or the word ‘territories’, a term devoid of any ethnographic or national references.

Thus these three filmmakers and their films offer us a multitude of new encounters between the Israeli and the Palestinian, and in between these encounters we experience an array of situations where identities are reconfirmed and re-established, or transformed and subverted. The world I live in is so full of the signs and technologies of separation and domination. Speaking for myself, I can say that I deeply value those moments that subvert this formal process and uncover for us the other possibilities. And here I don’t mean that mushy coexistence stuff that is conveyed through many a naive film or organization (they mean well but...). What I value in these encounters is the production of identity in a manner that allows the birth of ‘third identities’ in place of the ‘self’ and the ‘other.’ My goal in this essay, therefore, is to highlight those complexities in the films and filmmakers that demand that we employ means other than the notion of representation in order to understand them. Because - especially when it comes to the study of film in the context of Israeli Palestinian conflict - ‘representation’ is the theoretical tool most used, and although it sheds light on many of the aspects of the discourses of power and domination, there are instances in film that beg for another kind of analysis. One of these instances is when the filmmaker belongs equally to two conflicting identities, or carries within him an ‘excess’ of identities.

Mohamed Bakri said once in an interview that he felt compelled to do something; he felt he had to go to Jenin and make a film about the horrors that occurred there. Bakri wanted to carry back to the Israeli public the ‘other’ story of what happened. He wanted to restore the human factor within the jargon of military signs of ‘terror’ and ‘territories’.

Bakri is himself in two different locations, like nearly every other Palestinian Israeli. He is an Israeli citizen and a Palestinian. He is in both places, and he continued entering into both of those places. As an Israeli, he could go to Jenin, and once there he was able to enter as a Palestinian and then come back to Tel Aviv with a film and show it as an Israeli. (This information is not apparent in the film, it is information that I know about him.) His concern therefore was simply to carry the unheard Palestinian story back to the Israelis (and the world). He did not concern himself with the Israeli side of the story (the Israelis know it, or maybe it is all they know). So here the Israeli-Palestinian identity complex was not part of the film itself, but part of the ‘infrastructure’ that made the film possible.

Bakri’s film is the product of encounters between a Palestinian and other Palestinians (a very likely thing to happen for a dispersed and uprooted nation). But in question-and-answer and in interviews with Israeli radio and TV, Bakri speaks as an Israeli (albeit a *different kind* of Israeli). In *Jenin Jenin*, Bakri throws the film in the face of Israelis as if to say, “See what you did”, allowing them to ask questions, reflect and do whatever. In this film, Bakri did not really mean for Israelis to encounter Palestinians,

what I believe he meant is for Israelis to encounter themselves and their doings. So the encounters truly underway here are between Palestinian and Palestinian, and between Israeli and Israeli.

In *Ijtayah*, however, Nizar Hasan employs this complexity of identity in the infrastructure and narrative of the film. The filmmaker interrogates - of all Israelis - the one operating in the Jenin camp the great destruction machine, the D-9 bulldozer. I can't imagine it would be possible for most Palestinian filmmakers to have access to that Israeli soldier (or any other Israeli soldier) at such a tense moment. Hasan was able to do so because he is an Israeli citizen and was rightfully exercising his rights as a citizen.

To a great extent, Hasan in this film was talking to the soldier as another Israeli: they met in Israel, he spoke in Hebrew, used Israeli references, and was careful in his manner of speech to remain as unprovocative as possible. In this instance, when we watch Hasan and the soldier in the studio viewing the video material, we are privy to a multitude of encounters. There is the encounter between the refugees in Jenin and the Israeli army, and there is the encounter between the Israeli soldier and his victims - all enemies - and there is the encounter between the filmmaker and the soldier, and there is probably an ongoing encounter within the filmmaker himself, in that he is both Israeli and Palestinian at the same time.

Unlike Bakri, Hasan does not wait for the interview or the question-and-answer period to speak as an Israeli; he begins in the film, speaking as one Israeli to another. In a sense one could say that Bakri has made a Palestinian film, while Hasan has made an Israeli film. I don't mean here that one is better than the other, or that one is more sincere than the other. Hasan's film is also a Palestinian film; that depends on the audience. The film speaks with two tongues.

Juliano Mir-Khamis adds yet another dimension to this complexity of being one self and then the other. Mir-Khamis is the product of this possibility and belongs equally to both his Jewish mother and his Palestinian father. Mir-Khamis is not only an Israeli citizen, but he is Jewish according to Jewish law. Therefore, he is altogether in a different class from Hasan and Bakri and his identity complex is not only the product of historical and political situations; in a very real way, it runs in his blood. And this is what we see in his film: encounters between Israeli Jews and Palestinians that range from total adoration and love to total destruction and negation. I think about this not for a second as a split identity, but rather as an excess of this complex identity.

In Mir-Khamis' film, we see the Palestinian encountering himself after identification with the other, the Jew. One of the little boys in the film tells Mir-Khamis about how he felt towards Arna (Juliano's mother). "We thought she was Jewish," he says. But Arna didn't suddenly stop being Jewish, it is the boy who began to see her and feel about her differently. Another kid says that, "No Palestinian could have done for us what Arna has done." Is the child here rearranging the way he has been taught to see

the world, reconfiguring the un-traversable divide between Palestinians and Israelis? Something collapses here, and something new is born.

And there is the encounter between Arna, the Israeli Jew, and other Israeli Jews - be it the soldiers at the checkpoint or her own consciousness of who she was (a member of the Palmach) and what she has become (a fighter against occupation). There is also the encounter between Arna as a 'certain kind of Jew' who lived a certain life, and the whole notion of Jewishness. In death, Arna is refused burial in a Jewish cemetery.

The beauty of all of these encounters is that they convert identity from a pre-given ethos into a process, from being into becoming. Homi Bhabha puts it neatly in one of his essays: "[I]t is not in the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness."¹ In these films and filmmakers, we see various instances of this 'disturbing distance', ranging from neat divisions to beloved duality. We travel all the way from erasure of the other (with bulldozers) to adoring the other, the way Arna and the children adored each other, and the way Arna and her Palestinian husband adored each other before that.

There is yet another encounter in these films that begs for attention and rescue from over-analysis in the colonial dynamic of the Self and Other. It is the refugee camp, the site of all encounters. Israelis probably reserve their greatest contempt for the refugee camp because it is like the symptom that reminds one of a disease. To explain this point a bit more, I refer to what seems to be a favourite metaphor for many Israelis when they refer to Palestinians, or more precisely to their relationship with them: 'Shit'.

The film *Ijtiyah* incorporates an entire segment about shit, how the D-9 operators used to shit, and how they had to put up with the smell of their own excrement stored in the cabin with them because it would have been life-threatening to try and get rid of it. This is how horrible the situation is, this is how crappy it is, and this is the message. There was a short story translated and published in *Masharef*, the Arabic literary journal, titled "Finkelstein's Shit" (I translate from the Arabic), written by yet another soldier who served in Jenin.² Finkelstein takes a shit in the schoolyard, and the writer-soldier notices it, smells it, and reads within it the larger context of Finkelstein's comfortable life. He imagines what the teacher and his pupils will say about this shit: "[W]hen they come back to school, the teacher will try and convince the pupils that we are monsters, but the kids will find that out with their noses. Is there better proof?"

I remember many years ago photographer Emil Ashrawi telling me about an Israeli film (which I have yet to see). In the film, an Arab construction worker leaves his shit buried in the foundations of what is to become a fancy house. The house is completed, the owners move in, but the smell doesn't go away. More than anything else, this object - excrement - invites us to think psychoanalytically of the dynamics at play.

In his introduction to Edward Said's book on *Freud And The Non-European*,

Christopher Bollas writes of a psychosis which incorporates negative and positive hallucination. “The oppressed exists, in this respect, to contain unwanted destructiveness in the oppressor who insists at the same time that the oppressed be like a faecal entity that is so odious that it cannot be recognized except if and when it is out of sight, and finally eliminated.”³

What I like about the use of the shit metaphor in the context of the refugee camp is the fact that, whether you like it or not, you smell the shit you produce. It is interesting to notice that even this object has been turned around in these encounters. The story writer-soldier sees ‘shit’ in relation to the Israelis. He even calls it Finkelstein’s shit, so as to really define it and contain it within Israel. The D-9 driver erases a house to make room for the bulldozer to drive into a clearing so that he can open the door for few seconds and throw his shit out of the cabin.

Israelis refuse to see the refugee camp at all, or see it as shit that must be buried. The problem is that there are some 59 refugee camps with over two million people in them. Moreover, there are a total of more than two and a half million Palestinian refugees. This is the core of our problem, and precisely what Israelis refuse to deal with in reality - and so they deal with it metaphorically. The problem is that the refugee camp is ground zero. It is the belly of the beast. Real peace can be measured to a great extent in how it impacts the refugees and refugee camps.

Otherwise, it is only logical that, caught in the psychotic web of negative hallucinations, Jenin will turn into *junon* [madness] for the *jinan* [heavens]. Not only the residents of Jenin, but also every refugee, will carry this capacity. The Israelis have the choice as to whether to deal with our ‘Jenin’ or our ‘Junon’ or our craving for the ‘Jinan’.

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Endnotes

¹ Bhabha, Homi. “Interrogating Identity. Franz Fanon and the Prerogative of Identity”, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge: 1994) 45.

² *Masharef*, No 21 (Summer 2003) 127.

³ Said, Edward. *Freud and the Non-European*. (Verso: 2003) 6.