



Mauro Ivo Van Aken. *Facing Home: Palestinian Belonging in a Valley of Doubt.*
Maastricht: Shaker Publishing, 2003. 388 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-90-423-0221-1.

Reviewed by Hala Kh. Nassar (Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations, Yale University)

Published on H-Gender-MidEast (August, 2004)

Belonging, Place, and the Transformation of Modernity

From June 7 to 8 of this year delegates from sixty-seven countries and thirty-four international organizations gathered at the Geneva International Center for the largest conference on Palestinian refugees in fifty-six years. According to the UNRWA press release, three hundred delegates discussed “the future humanitarian assistance to millions of refugees scattered across the Middle East. Sweden, the United States, and Jordan were involved in the months of preparation for the conference by “leading working groups on future plans, as have inter-Governmental and international organizations such as the European Commission and UNICEF.” Mauro Van Aken’s book *Facing Home: Palestinian Belonging in a Valley of Doubt* could not have been timelier than this, given Jordan was one of the main organizers. This case study concerns the Jordan Valley or, as it is commonly known, *al-Ghour*, in the East Bank of the River Jordan. There, displaced Palestinians from the wars of 1948 and 1967 have “settled” in the valley with the help of UNRWA. The author lived and conducted his research in Edbab “Black village,” a highly heterogeneous village. In Edbab live the Jabrat tribe, the Turkmani tribe from the Haifa region, the Mashalkha tribe (allegedly native), the Gharaghir, and the ‘kabshe. *Al-Ghour* also has “foreign workers” from Egypt and Pakistan.

Much has been written on the Palestinian refugees, and the Geneva conference adds to the recent plethora of organizing conferences, workshops, policy making, research and analysis of the unresolved status of the refugees. The first U.N. Resolution 194 concerning the Palestinian refugees’ Right of Return was issued in 1948.

Since then displaced Palestinians in the Jordan Valley, in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, or in the occupied territories are still waiting for the resolution to take effect. This book’s main argument is that international organizations trying to help Palestinian refugees in *al-Ghour* do not take into account the subject of their help nor their needs. In chapter 1, the author systematically and thematically presents an overview of various studies on refugees. He also looks at international aid agencies which, along with Jordan Valley Authority, resettle refugees as farmers in *al-Ghour* as a crucial part of dealing with their status and as an object of economic development and agribusiness in the valley. Van Aken, drawing on various fields such as anthropology, sociology, and political science or postcolonial studies, presents his narrative. The author argues that the displaced Palestinians in the valley can see the Israeli settlements’ bright lights in the West Bank: they want to return, thus, while waiting they resist settlement in the valley by refusing to be reduced to farmers and by creating temporary homes based on their Palestinian identity and culture.

In chapter 2, Van Aken looks at who lives at *al-Ghour* and what their conflicting identities and loyalties are. *Al-Ghour*, also referred to as Project Area, is a model site of modern agribusiness. High unemployment among the youths of the valley, however, is attributed to Aid Agencies whose main aim has been to make a farming community out of the valley but has not catered to other needs of the refugees. Therefore, 70 percent of *al-Ghour*’s youth looks for work outside the valley and outside the country. Chapter 2 is very illuminating for anyone interested

in International aid and World Bank policies. Regardless of identity, (whether a Palestinian, a refugee, or a Jordanian) everybody wants access to the available resources, irrigation system, water resources, division of land, marketing, use of chemicals and pesticides, and uses all means to get access. Ethnic and class tension exist in *al-Ghour*. In spite of Jordan's national discourse *nahnu kulluna wahed* (we are all one), nationality plays a huge role: whether Jordanian, Palestinian (different class and color) or foreign worker, not to speak of women who, of course, work in the greenhouse: *bait al-plastic* (p. 69).

Navigating and exploiting identities in order to have access to either social or governmental resources is the topic of chapter 3. The author argues that there is continuous tension in *al-Ghour* between "flexible and heterogeneous identity levels, and the reproduction of a community of Palestinian vis-à-vis other social groups" (p. 81). The 1948 refugees who first came to the valley were farmers and thus ended up being identified with their displacement. They were the pioneers who introduced agriculture and the first greenhouses thus helping other refugees to legitimize their present identities and negotiate contrasting memories. However, the heterogeneous community of the valley reflects different places, different levels of identity and hence different loyalties, although ethnicity and political expression are silent in the valley according to the section "Being Fella or Bedu" (p. 88ff). In looking at other places of *al-Ghour*, one sees how social networks, kinship and solidarity strengthen Palestinian identity in relation to the other, albeit Jordanian or worker from Egypt or Pakistan.

In "Visiting as A Spatial Performance," the title of chapter 4, Van Aken carefully explains the difference between a clan, a tribe, and the nuclear family. He emphasizes that visiting is not only a social practice, but also the forum where business is conducted, negotiated, and maneuvered. Through the presence of *diwan* (solidarity, identity, customs and performing), Palestinian identity is reinforced daily. This chapter shows that the international planners of *al-Ghour* failed to understand the cultural reality and the object of development. The *Diwan* and the family's readiness to have daily visits is also used as a medium for social climbing among poor Palestinian refugees who have lost both land and kinship. Chapter 4 provides a thorough first reading for anyone interested in knowing how social ties, kinship, and family solidarity function, not only in Palestinian society, but also in other Arab societies. What is interesting about visiting is how its meaning and audience has changed over time. Previously it was a forum where older people

talked and the young listened. With the disappearance of the traditional tribal *diwan*, and the rise of the nuclear family, young people of the valley have no outside forum. According to the author, this might explain the rise of alcoholism, violence and social disruption among al-Ghour's youths. The chapter ends with a small section on women. The invisibility of women from the family's *diwan* is strongly associated with keeping the woman's honor and respectability, a common behavior in Middle Eastern societies.

The theme of visiting and hospitality is elaborated on chapter 5. Family ties and kinship play a major role in shaping emotional bonds, ceremonial feelings, and practices in Palestinian culture. They also define the inhabitants of the Jordan Valley as a "family farm" society by the outside observer, i.e. the economist, who fails to grasp the dynamics and cultural dimensions of the social network and the patterns in the lives of the displaced. Cultural performances—whether dancing the *debkeh* in weddings or listening to music—are all signs employed by the displaced Palestinians in their attempt to articulate their identity and unresolved status.

In chapter 6, we are introduced to the wedding preparation of the groom. In painstaking details and interviews, the author takes us step-by-step through this cultural ritual. The wedding is looked upon as a collective custom where neighborhood, family kinship and ties, and the whole village come together. To the author, the wedding party (*hafla*) has become a "local tool, among others, in understanding belonging, place and the transformation of modernity in the valley" (p. 167). In dance and music the refugees refer to other places and spaces: the lost home. To them, the wedding gives a cultural meaning to the daily life of displacement in the valley. For example, Van Aken discusses the Palestinian traditional dance *dabkeh* and how inhabitants of the valley have culturally appropriated it, so that what was "out of place" in the valley, now becomes a "place in the valley": a national contestation and affirmation to claim lost identities and territories. Chapter 6 also explains who dances at wedding parties, who leads the *dabkeh*, how vengeance and violence enter the parties and how they are gendered. In other words, in wedding parties, women are separated from men, which is looked upon as *halal*. If wedding parties are mixed, it become *haram* and therefore a marker of lower social status and morals.

"Beyond Agriculture: Representation and Power" is the title of chapter 7. Here Van Aken investigates the "Project Area" of the Jordan Valley, which is probably

the most planned, photographed, and guarded area in the world due to its proximity to Israel. He also looks at the various historical discourses viewing the Jordan Valley, as a holy site by the colonizers to seize land, and a landscape where the others inhabit the land. In this type of discourse, displaced Palestinians suddenly are reduced and transformed to “landless farmers.” In other words, in this arid landscape where water is extremely scarce, the “local farmer,” whose main problem is the lack of water and agricultural development, is assimilated into the farm work and thus becomes the object of the Jordan Valley agricultural project and an agent of a possible solution. Hence the farm work and the farming family (an American model) define the place and the identity of its inhabitants. For example, none of the mud brick houses of the 1948 refugees survived. Instead project houses or private cement ones were built. Yet exploiting the farmer as an icon was what the international agencies like USAID, JVA, UNRWA, FAO, and GTZ, among others, aimed to do when settling the displaced. Since Palestinians resisted this imposition, they were accused of being in need of development. The international organizations looked at the displaced as the others that created a tension and thus created tensions. The imposition of technological development on the valley’s inhabitants, Van Aken argues, is being resisted by the refugees. Through family ties and social circles they renew contacts, and some manage to return to Palestine or go elsewhere. The chapter also looks at how women, despite social stigma, are

entering the agribusiness due to cash earning.

The last chapter of the book looks at social relations and networking among the various inhabitants of the valley in relation to people outside of the valley. It investigates how, for instance, Egyptian workers are sometime included or excluded from social frameworks. It also looks at patterns of co-operation among the inhabitants of the valley in trying to manipulate the Jordan Valley Authorities, i.e., when it comes to open the water valve, avoiding bureaucracy.

Van Aken follows a simplified version of Halloun’s (1996) form of Arabic transliteration, yet there are repeated errors. Following Modern Standard Arabic transliteration and correcting the errors would make the narrative smoother. A final comment on the cover of the book: I was elated to see a black Palestinian holding a picture frame with a collage of photographs. Veiled women’s faces stand out among the other photographs. With this cover, one might imagine a chapter dedicated to Palestinian women refugees, but in spite of the very small sections on women in the book, the author does not treat their issues in detail except their role in the agribusiness. However, the book is a significant study and offers good bibliography. It is a good source for anyone who is interested in studying agricultural development, performance, and articulation of national identities under the auspices of UNRWA.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-gender-mideast>

Citation: Hala Kh. Nassar. Review of Van Aken, Mauro Ivo, *Facing Home: Palestinian Belonging in a Valley of Doubt*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. August, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9660>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.