

**Art Under The Gun:
The Role of Symbols Especially the Key in Contemporary Palestinian Art**

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Abstract

The art of Palestine, especially painting, has focused in recent decades on symbolism with value concepts, although it has experienced indirect effects of Western modernism. Palestinian painting symbols, which include a wide range of elements and phenomena, are, in some cases, consistent with common themes and sometimes are for Palestinian artists due to specific circumstances, as well as political and religious conditions. Meanwhile, some motifs have a special expressive capacity. Researches on the art of Palestine show that since the birth of Israel, some of the motifs have exerted a role and even beyond a painting as a symbol and dynamic expression of Palestinian art, and the Palestinians found them a model of national ownership expropriation and confiscation of their property. The specific conditions of Palestine have led to the emergence of resistance culture and art; and in the present paper, it is attempted to refer to the contemporary Palestinian painting to examine the element of resistance and its symbols, especially the key symbol in the contemporary Palestine art.

Keywords: *Palestinian art, Symbolic art, Symbol, Old key, Islamic art*

Introduction

Human civilization is full of the arts of people who have been telling others about issues, problems and concerns. These issues have been sometimes individual and sometimes collective, sometimes leading to happiness and sometimes to worries. Human art is a sign of identity, derived from its perception and worldview, especially since people of a nation, for various reasons, prefer to add the art to the solutions that are possible for them to express their concerns, their history, and their existence because through the art they can put aside differences in language and communicate with the senses, conscience and intellect of the audience in every corner of the world about human values, including freedom and resistance against losing them.

Throughout the history, symbols have been presented in various forms in the art of every nation depending on its thinking and worldview; this issue has a special status in the art of Palestine.

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The great ancient heritage with the political conditions the Palestinians have lived in, inevitably and necessarily, have led them to this expressive approach. The role of these symbols is in fact a kind of recording the summary of the various situations and conditions that Palestinians lived in. It should be noted that each period of the history of the Palestinians has led to the creation of its own special symbols according to the time and circumstances of that given period.

Obviously, those Palestinian artists living in the occupied territories have preferred to use symbols in their work more than artists in exile. The works of the artists of the occupied territories can be recognized generally through the symbolism dominant them. This is natural for those who live in the occupied region because they cannot show their patriotic feelings through the obvious application of the realistic styles. Symbolism and other forms of transmission and communication as indirect means of expression, in the meanwhile, are considered as usable and useful alternatives and sometimes have a greater impact.

Symbol and Symbolism in Islamic Art

According to many thinkers and art experts, the language of Islamic art is a symbolic and cryptic language. In fact, the Muslim artist focuses on the non-simile image of the Lord's creation and does not understand the image with the third dimension; in other words, he deals with the spiritual theme of objects, and this theme is related to the Lord's power breathed in objects (Atasoy, Bahnassi et al. 1990).

In this case, the function of symbol finds special significance and reveals God more than ever. Some Western scholars in the early twentieth century believed that Islamic art is an exclusively decorative art without the religious iconography (Kühnel, Watson et al. 1967). But over time, there were other schools of thought based on the opinions of orientalists and Islamic scholars such as Henry Carbon, who believed that every part of an Islamic art product contains a latent meaning linked to a particular philosophy which is stable in time, concept and place (Vernoit 2000), an approach that is basically consistent with the attitudes of the Muslim artist.

The symbol in the general sense is the literary or artistic representation of a trait or a state by mediating a sign; and in the special sense, it is the visual interpretation of an abstract subject by transforming the profile of the subject into specific traits of form, colour, and movement (Pakbaz 2007). In general, it can be said that the symbol is a way of expressing concepts that cannot be expressed in direct language. The use of symbols is one of the essential requirements of human life because there are always non-physical meanings and concepts for humankind. The symbol not only reveals the dimensions of external reality, but also reveals the internal dimensions remained unseen and unknown.

The Art of Palestine in the Twentieth Century

The emergence of Western modernism and the expansion of its influence in the eastern nations are among the important reasons for the fundamental changes in the Arab countries' culture and arts in terms of form and content. Issues and events such as the outbreak of the World War and the domination of great powers over nations, as well as the study of students and artists of Eastern and

Arab countries in Europe, along with the presence of cultural advisers in some of these areas accelerated and intensified the process of such impacts.

In the early twentieth century and with the outbreak of the World War I, some Islamic countries were occupied by the Allied Forces. The presence of foreigners in these countries led to political-cultural developments, so that in some areas, developments went beyond the social domains included changes in the worldview (Eskandari 2005). The development and progress of Arabic art from the global modernism viewpoint began in the early twentieth century as a direct consequence of the increased interactions between the East and West. The fundamental changes of this period featured itself in all areas of the Western and Eastern worlds which included the theme of the art world (von Roques 2009).

Following this trend, artists in the Arab countries started European style painting. Many of them were previously in Europe and in contact with and influenced by the various art movements such as Impressionism and Expressionism. Meanwhile, artists from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Morocco became pioneers for other Arab artists. In the 1930s, in cities such as Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, and even Rabat in Morocco, the first group of artists was formed with the trends and techniques of European art and linked to their cultural background.

The territory of Palestine was occupied by the British forces at the start of the First World War. Due to the influence of the British politics on the administration of the Arab countries and the consequent lack of serious resistance on their part, the British government and Jewish leaders announced the formation of a Jewish state in Palestine by publishing the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Since that time, the land has become the site of the Palestinian conflict with the occupying forces. The activities of the Palestinian artists in the occupied territories have always been at risk because the Palestinian artist has always pursued his activities in cultural domain as a freedom force. Most of these artists have been sentenced to long prison terms in collaboration with Palestinian militant organizations.

The identity of the Palestinian artist was summed up in the early elements of his existence as a Palestinian in relationship with his land, time and crisis. He focused his energy on the creation of a particular person whose aim is to achieve an art that honestly expresses his experience, feelings and originality (Hammoud 1988). The method employed in most of their works shows an explicit and intense dependence on Palestine. With this idea, they have joined to a number of other Palestinian artists living out of their homeland and scattered throughout the world. Works created in the occupied region are bitter, hostile and bold; they are intense objections to the invasion of Israel to occupy Palestine.

The style of most of the works of artists from the occupied territories in the contemporary era has been toward the surrealist and symbolic methods because of lack of freedom and the presence of the security forces. These two tendencies are distinct from other works of Palestinian artists. The return of the Palestinian artists in the 50's created some movements in Palestine's art. Afaf Arafat, whose works were influenced by English universities, played a major role in this movement. After graduating from England, Afaf went to the United States and received his fine arts degree in 1966. The image of the suburbs of Palestinian cities is evident in his works.

In 1962, the first art group was formed as the “Artists Group” and The council was the venue for the work of artists such as Samia Zaru, who studied at the American University of Beirut and the University of Washington; Vladimir Tamari, who used Arabic typography in his painting style; Sari Ibrahim Khoury, who studied fine arts in the United States and became Hoda Mikhail. He held exhibitions in Ramallah, Jerusalem and Amman. With the outbreak of the 1967 war, these artists, like the rest of the Palestinians, had to leave their homeland and resided in Amman, Beirut, London, Paris, Washington, and Tokyo.

Ismail Shammout is also one of the prominent Palestinian artists, he completed his studies in Cairo and Italy. He became the official artist of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1970s. His works reflect the facts and struggles and sufferings of the Palestinian people. He established his first exhibition in Gaza in 1953. His wife, Tamam al Akhal, also was painting. In the works of this artist couple, the pressures, concerns, and insecurity are clearly apparent with the combination of lines and movements of the pallet knife.

Among the first-generation of Palestinian artists who immigrated to other countries, one can refer to Julia Seraphim and Paul Guiragossian; the latter was killed in 1993 in Beirut. They became Lebanese artists and leaders in Lebanon art after staying in Lebanon. Badran’s studio was also one of the centers created by Jamal Badran. In this institute, the artists, amateurs and outstanding collectors such as Yousef Najjar and Mohammed Siam were doing some activities. This collection was opened with the aim of supporting Islamic culture, art, and tradition in art. But with the onset of the political crisis in Palestine, these artists tended to be active in a modern way, like Impressionism, and their goals were actually forgotten. Jamal Badran started his activities in the UNESCO Art Department in Tripoli, Libya; and Jamal Abdul Razaq worked at the Department of Photography at the University of Jordan.

The new art movement in Palestine was formed around 1955 by a number of Palestinian artists educated in Arab, European and American countries. These artists, who were scattered in different countries, expressed their support for Palestinians with their works. Their artistic activities and exchanges were expanded throughout the world, and Palestine’s art changed from native to international, and from traditional to modern. These changes are evident in the works of Kamal Boullata. He delivered lectures at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, and created a new dimension in Arabic calligraphy by the silk printing and using the elegant and beautiful blends. He introduced the Arabic art as one of the contemporary arts. While following the American art movement led some artists such as Samia Halami to use kinetic art that was quite different from his previous abstract works.

With the relationship between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the artists of these two sectors founded the Palestinian Artists’ Association in the occupied territories in 1972. The result of this association was the holding of several exhibitions and joint seminars in the occupied territories. The members of the forum included: Suleiman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Issam Bader, Ibrahim Saba, and Tayseer Barakat who were supported and appreciated by those who were interested in the culture and art of Palestine. After a while, the activity of this association was banned by the occupiers and its works were confiscated and some artists were sentenced to prison. The association made a meeting in Amman in 1969 and then moved to Beirut and then to Kuwait. This

organization established its main office in Jerusalem; and in 1970, there was only a small branch of it in Jerusalem and Ramallah.

The Palestinian Artists' Association organized branches in different areas for the communication with Palestinian artists in other associations. It also actively communicated with the Arab Artists Union and jointly organized exhibitions in various parts of the world to indicate the rights of the Palestinian people. The following decades and the review of the works of the late 20th and early 21st century by Palestinian artists indicate that most of them are a reaction to the continuation of the occupation of this land (Bloom and Blair 2009).

The ideals, wishes, freedom, resistance and oppression, pain and suffer, distancing from the homeland and the like are the concepts that have remained in the minds of Palestinians since the occupation of Palestine up to now and an inseparable part of their art (which is an inseparable part of their culture, era, and worldview) is inspired by these concepts and thoughts. Examining the contemporary Palestinian painting, one can find that nationalist themes became more prevalent in the contemporary period and after Nakba day in 1948, and Palestinian artists used a variety of media to express their connection with their identity and homeland.

In the study of Palestinian art, this should not be forgotten that modern Palestine art not only covers the works of artists operating in Israel and the Palestinian territories, but also includes the works produced by Palestinian refugees and immigrants in the Arab world, Europe and America (Ibid). More precisely, the field of Palestinian art, as well as the Palestinian social structure, has expanded into four major geographic centers: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Israel, Palestinians dispersed in the Arab world, the United States and Europe (Ben-Zvi 2006). Therefore, the definition of the current origins of art in this area can be considered in two parts or positions: first, the art of Palestinians scattered throughout the world, but united to express the patriotic emotions such as the individual voices of the choir, in the face of art, and the various Palestinian experiences; and the other is the art of the Palestinian land limited to the artists living in the occupied country. Today, the art of Palestine in the field of visualization includes a wide range of media including painting, graphics, graffiti, street art, sculpture, photography, video, layout, etc., which follows its own specific practices in the presentation and expression. One of these features is the symbolism or iconic aspect implicit in Islamic art from the past to the present. The Palestinian artist actually uses Western art styles in a way to serve his purposes and this goal is not isolated from the aspirations of his society.

The Palestinians' use of the styles and achievements of Western artists such as realism, expressionism, surrealism, Dadaism, and even abstraction cannot be considered a blind and part by part imitative. On the contrary, the use of these styles was influenced by such a particular way that they were almost "Palestinianized" (Zeidan 2010). This art has a strong background and its approach and content are not merely one-dimensional. Although the Palestinian struggle and effort are a source of inspiration for many artists, Palestinian art is not simply defined by the political nature of Palestine.

The modern Palestinian art has become a part of a sequential process in which Palestine's culture and heritage play a major role. It is true that the period after the Nakba day has a significant impact

on the artworks, but new generations of Palestinian artists have redefined the boundaries of display and creativity (Farhat 2009).

After the first intifada, they considered the relationship with national aspirations and motivations against the occupation in the form of personal and internal experiences, and interpretations of the “national ideals”; and they achieved a more personal statement in this regard (Ramos 2011). Indeed, since 1984 and in response to the occupation of the Palestinian Territory, it has been possible to identify a range of symbolic meanings linked with the continuous expression of national identity. Items such as peasant, cactus, soil, tree, olive, and body of a woman all represent the meaning of humans and the lost lands (Gandolfo 2010). Of course, the plurality of these symbols includes a wide range of objects, plants, animals, and phenomena, sometimes aligned and meaningful with global equivalents and, in some cases, created by the minds of the Palestinian artists.

Symbols and Motifs of Contemporary Palestinian Art

Studies and observations indicate that each period of Palestinian history, depending on the circumstances of the time, has continued the overall and sustainable concepts and has created and represented different symbols. In an objective study of contemporary Palestinian painting, especially in the works of naturalism, realism, abstract and decorative, one can find several examples of designs, shapes and symbolic motifs that represent the above concepts well.

Some of the symbolic forms used in contemporary Palestinian art are related to indigenous and value concepts whose expression and presentation in Islamic culture and worldview, especially in the occupied Palestinian art, are more perceptible and meaningful. Concepts and paintings such as Jerusalem and Shrine, the face or body of the martyr, and chafiyeh are some of these symbols. In the study of the symbolic works of contemporary Palestinian artists, one can mention a section that includes humans, places, and events. The works of Suleiman Mansour, a contemporary Palestinian artist, to illustrate symbolism through the aforementioned topics is a good example of this claim. Mansour is best known for his painting of an elderly man who is carrying Jerusalem, the old enclosed city with the Quds mosque as the king’s crown on his back.



Painting by Suleiman Mansour

Cooper believes that Jerusalem has a global symbolic meaning in addition to native and Islamic meanings. He believes that the final transformation of the universe and the regained paradise are the common global symbolic meanings of Jerusalem. But its concept in Palestinian symbolism means Palestine and the land of peace, a long-term wish, and being far from the homeland (Boullata 2009).

Naturalist motifs are another symbolic concept in contemporary Palestinian art, which have not necessarily been used in a single form but in combination with other visual symbols, for example, the motifs of animals in some works, along with the motifs of objects and celestial objects, etc., or plants in combination with humans or other items.

The olive branch is one of the naturalist motifs used for two common and universal concepts with symbolic Palestinian and Islamic notions. The olive branch in its universal meaning, and especially with a pigeon, is a symbolic element of peace, equality, and the golden age (Cooper 1987). But the olive tree was considered to be the “tree of life” for the ancient Greek and Roman people, the Hebrew people and, of course, the Muslims. In general, it can be said that the tree symbolizes the cultural, economic and spiritual heritages of the Palestinians (Zarur 2008).

The olive tree, the land, and the peasant are all the representations of the identity of the Palestinians in an attempt to portray the connection and the bondage of the indigenous people to this land (Ramos 2011).

Objects and devices used in the contemporary Palestinian art to express various concepts can also be considered in terms of symbolic expression. Among these, chafiyah or kofiyah, one of the traditional Arabic garments, has become a symbol for Palestinians in recent years, and also has a symbolic place in the contemporary art of this land. Kamal Zidan believes that the indigenous/Islamic symbolic notion of chafiyah in contemporary Palestinian painting is the identity and love for the homeland. This symbol was used for the first time between 1936 and 1939 among the workers who had risen against the occupation of England and the Zionists, and was later used extensively and became a symbol of contemporary Palestinian art. The key and the door are other objects that can be seen as the symbolic concepts in contemporary Palestinian art.

The Old Key as the Symbol of Nakba day in Contemporary Palestine Art

On May 15, 1948, there was a bitter incident in the history of the Palestinian Territory and about 80% of the Palestinian land, except the West Bank and Gaza Strip, was occupied by the Zionists; under the heavy fire of artillery and massacres by the Zionist occupiers, thousands of Palestinian citizens displaced to three neighboring countries i.e., Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, and then scattered over the time to other countries around the world. This day, called as Nakba day, reminds us the bitter memories of the people displaced and oppressed by the Zionists occupation.

Another notable symbol, known as the symbol of Nakba day, is the “key”. This symbol is a protest against the seizure of the land and property of the Palestinians plundered many years ago by the Zionists.

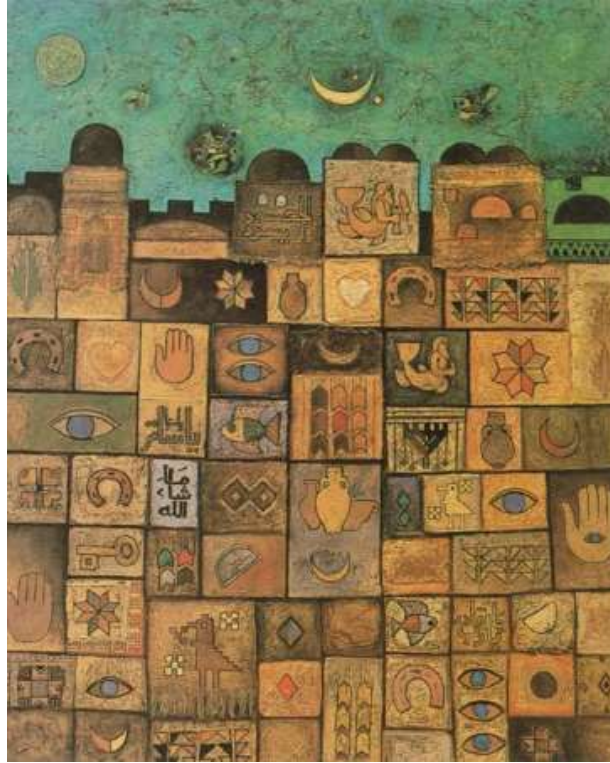
Cooper believes that in their universal and common symbolic meanings, the key and the door are tools to show liberation and knowledge. But examining the use of the key as a symbolic element in Palestine’s culture and art, it can be found that it is a symbol to express the return to home and the Palestinians’ right to return to their homeland (Cooper 1987). Abdul Rahman Al-Mozayen, a contemporary Palestinian artist, used the old key element as a key of peace in a modern way in his works (Zeidan 2010) . He shows a woman who throws a pigeon put in an arrow and bow.

Zidan believes that the woman in Palestine’s art is a symbol of motherhood, dignity, and homeland. In addition, Sherwell believes that the woman in contemporary Palestinian art, based on its native and Islamic symbolism, means motherland and a beloved virgin land (Malhi-Sherwell 2001). On the other hand, the arrow and bow is a symbol of rock and the only weapon the Palestinians have. Zidan believes that Abdul Rahman would like to show that the return of the Palestinians to their homeland is the first step towards peace in this struggle.



Painting by Abdul Rahman Al-Mozayen

In one of his works and in an abstract manner, Solomon Mansur, another Palestinian artist, puts a collection of motifs alongside some other elements such as the hand, the full Moon and some geometric designs derived from Islamic art to represent the legacy of the Palestinians throughout the history. Indeed, his work is a Palestinian illustrated history. The symbol of the old key as a symbol of returning home can not only be seen in other works of contemporary Palestine art, but also in the culture of the people of this land. So that people take it every year in the march of the day of Nakba day.



Painting by Suleiman Mansour

Conclusion

The symbolism is a quality and characteristic that art takes in religious civilizations and defines its inner concepts to represent an idea or entity. This feature exists in Islamic arts, especially in the art of Palestine.

The presence of cultural consultants in Islamic countries, the study of graduates and art students of these countries in Europe, the emergence of the World War, and the domination of powers are the main factors of the West influence on culture and, naturally, the art of the defeated lands. After the First World War, the arts of the Islamic countries were influenced by colonialists and some changes appeared in their presentation and form (modernism), but the concepts were not necessarily altered. The mentioned influences in some cases attracted the concerned culture and became nationalized to serve the purposes and intentions of that nation. The Palestinian art, as its social structure, has expanded into four major geographic centers: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Israel, Palestinians dispersed in the Arab world, and the United States and Europe.

Hence, the artistic productions of Palestine can be united in two different areas: “Palestinian art” which is scattered throughout the world, but united when it comes to patriotic emotions; and “art originated from Palestine” by the artists living in the occupied country. The form of the presentation of these arts has gradually turned the collective form into a more personalized one.

Applied scope of symbols in the art of Palestine, and in particular painting, includes a wide range of objects, plants, animals and phenomena. These symbols are sometimes aligned and meaningful with the world equivalents; and in some cases, they are the brainchild of the Palestinian artists. For example, the symbolic concepts found in paintings such as chafiyah, martyr, peasant, Jerusalem, cactus and, of course, the key, can be presented or at least expressed in the Arab and Islamic

worlds. The pictorial symbols in the contemporary Palestinian painting imply human concepts such as freedom, struggle against oppression, resistance, peace and compromise, hope, and so on. These symbols are used principally in combination, and each work can usually be considered a representation of several visual and symbolic patterns.

Since the birth of Israel, the key has existed as a motif and even beyond a graphic art, as a symbol and dynamic manifestation of Palestinian art. The people and contemporary Palestinian artists use this element as a symbol of coming back home and the right of the people of this land to return to their homeland.

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