



# A Never-Ending Now

By Riyam Kafri AbuLaban



There is no other moment in a woman's life more defined, more discontinuous than her henna night. She sits in her parents' living room, turned into a ballroom for the occasion, donning a two-hundred-year-old headpiece. She wears a *thobe* on which threads of red, pink, and green melt into each other and shimmer under the light. Her eyes are heavily outlined with black kohl, her lips a shade of pink reserved only for brides; her nails manicured, and her hands jingling with golden bangles. She is a vision. Unbeknownst to her, she is traversing the moment and turning what she has always *known* as *now* into *then*. She is transforming her future into an uncharted *now*. The sound of drumming draws near, and then the sound of women, singing in unison, explodes into the living room.

*Massechom bilkhair ya halnasayeb, massechom bilkhair qoomo bihalwajeb...*

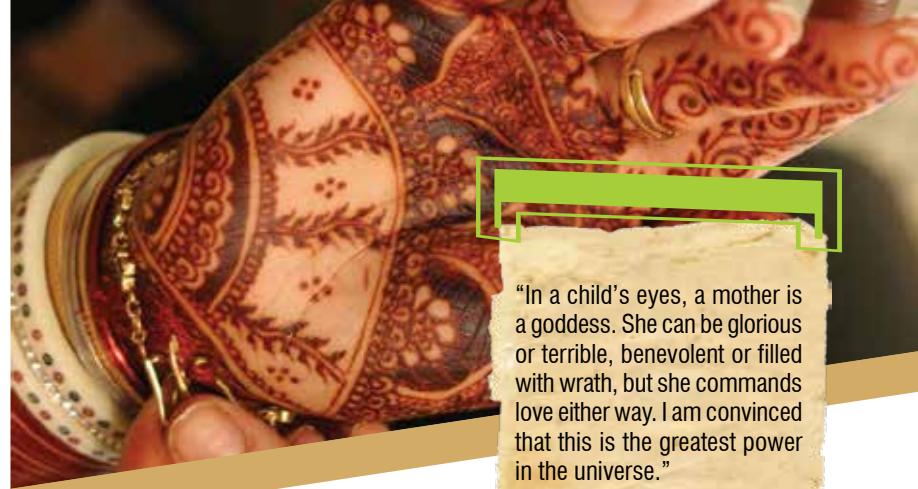
[Good evening, dear in-laws; good evening, show us hospitality...]

*Ya niyyalek ya hilwa o sirty minna, o ihna achbar el balad o el shor ilna*

[Lucky you, beautiful, you are *now* one of us, we are the heads of this town and we rule it.]

With every verse sung and answered, her *then* retreats into the past, and her *now* struts in to create a new reality. The singing itself is an echo of the past into the present as the voices of the older generation swirl with the younger generation singing together lyrics that are the story of Palestine's *then* transposed into its *now*.

In a cold, sterile operating room with gangrene-green walls, the anesthesiologist asks her to curve her back into a C-shape. She turns



"In a child's eyes, a mother is a goddess. She can be glorious or terrible, benevolent or filled with wrath, but she commands love either way. I am convinced that this is the greatest power in the universe."

N.K. Jemisin, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*

to him and asks incredulously "How?" There is no room to curve anything with the oversized baby bump sitting practically in her lap and protruding almost to the wall. She tries to curve anyway. He inserts a needle, she screams with pain and bites the nurse. Her doctor walks in and asks them to put her under full anesthesia. She wakes up an hour later, and two baby cribs are brought in. Her mother hands her one at a time. The three generations sit in the hospital silence, sharing their

rhythmic sounds of breathing. A new *now* is born, and motherhood hovers in the room proudly announcing the indoctrination of yet another soldier into her frontlines.

I quit my job today, I ended the *now* I have been living in. A *now* that has

*For survival, by Palestinian Artist Ismail Shammout. 1999.*



been a continuous spectrum of mission impossible. The commute through Qalandiya coupled with the romantic idea that one day I am going to write a bestseller titled *Qalandiya and Me*, the class preparations and countless meetings, the faculty workshops I want to go to but cannot because of eye infections; the faculty retreat I spent months planning to go to, precluding it with endless speeches of "Mama needs to go away for a couple of days, you will be fine. Of course baba *knows* how to make you chocolate milk!" The endless explanations to family members on why I have to go to the United States for ten days to attend a workshop, crowned with finally boarding that plane and breathing in anticipation mixed with guilt for leaving the little ones behind. The endless explanations to my male boss on why I have to miss class yet again, because one of my children is sick, yet again; the question of what to cook for dinner tonight, that starts the night before and progresses through the day ending with a panicked rush of thawing, sautéing, broiling, and grilling. The obscene amount of laundry detergent bought at the grocery store, and the even more obscene mounds of laundry waiting patiently at home. The unclear job description of a *kinneh* (daughter-in-law) and all the duties that come with that position, and the frightening realization that one can fall into a career of being a *kinneh*, and the even more frightening realization that I do not want that...ever! All that and more compose a never-ending *now* that sprung from a headpiece, a *thobe*, a drum, my parents living room turned into a ballroom, and henna on my hands painted to the sound of women singing. It is this impractical *now* that educated, career-oriented mothers deal with.

It is this *now* that leads to the resignation, and the career reinvention, so that it may shrivel into a distant *then*. It is this *now* that is not discussed in women's-movement circles, and is certainly not on the agenda of women's

centers' board meetings. It can neither be quantified nor clearly identified. Its symptoms include but are not limited to an unyielding feeling of guilt for wanting to be a good mother and a good professor all at the same time, fatigue, and sleepless nights. It is not as devastating as hunger, not as destructive as war, not ruining like rape. It is not worthy of a feminist discourse. It is a silent battle that mothers all over the world and especially in what feels like a contemporary Palestine go through, fighting against all opposite tides, trying to make sense of their reality. It is the price women pay for daring to love their careers as much as their children and husbands. It is the sacrifice they end up making quietly that cannot be articulated.

Motherhood is the most traditional role a woman can assume. Never did it occur to me, however, that it would lead me to the most unexpected decision I could ever make. I quit my job today. I left academia today. I left a job I love, and students who, if put together, would form a mosaic of my soul. I have no plans, no idea what awaits around the next bend of this rocky ride. Maybe I will write, maybe I will stay home and finally get a chance to finger paint. Maybe I will read, maybe I will bake. Who *knows*?

*Riyam Kafri AbuLaban is one of This Week in Palestine's content editors. She holds a PhD in organic chemistry from the University of Tennessee. Her research interests span a wide spectrum that includes computer-based drug design, philosophy and science, art science, and education. She is an aspiring writer with contributions to Mashallah News, Brownbook, and This Week in Palestine. Samples of her writing appeared recently in a book on Palestinian narrative titled Palestine Speaks: Narratives of Life Under Occupation (Voice of Witness). Riyam is currently working on a food memoir/cookbook so delicious you will lick the pages. She can be reached at riyam.kafri@gmail.com.*