

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

## “Filling in the Blanks”: Jaffa’s Oranges, an English Suit, and the Rememoring of Palestinian History

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Suad Amiry, *Mother of Strangers: A Novel* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2022)

Mustafa Kabha and Nahum Karlinsky, *The Lost Orchard: The Palestinian-Arab Citrus Industry, 1850–1950* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021)

Like great port cities throughout history, Jaffa has always welcomed strangers; enough of them to earn its sobriquet “mother of strangers” (*umm al-gharib*). The gateway to Palestine and the Levant since ancient times, Jaffa is not only the site of multiple events of biblical or broader religious significance. With the incorporation of Palestine in the late 18th century into the still developing modern world system, Jaffa became a city of culture and commerce, with winding casbahs and tree-lined boulevards, Turkish baths and Jewish bordellos, sand dunes and orange orchards—lots of them, as we’ll see—and some of the most striking architecture, never mind coastline, of the Eastern Mediterranean. North African Jews, Haurani Bedouins, Afghan traders, rabbis from Beirut, troubadours from Jerusalem, divas from Mansoura, and more than a few European Christian and Jewish pilgrims, all made their way to and through Jaffa over the centuries, joining a local population that septupled to over 17,000 during the course of the 19th century. They were joined by tens of thousands of Jews for whom Jaffa was a port of entry to Palestine with the onset of Zionist colonization. Jaffa, in other words, is the perfect locale for a novel, especially when, as with award-winning architect and writer Suad Amiry’s first novel, *Mother of Strangers*, most of it happens to be rooted in truth.

*Mother of Strangers* opens on a warm June day in 1947, introducing us to one of the novel’s two main protagonists, fifteen-year-old mechanic-in-training extraordinaire Subhi. Subhi’s life, including his many youthful adventures, dalliances, and soon enough, tragedies, is just coming into its own as the novel begins, while the June in question was a portentous moment in Palestine’s history. In February of that year, the British referred the question of the future of Palestine to the newly established United Nations (UN). A UN vote on partition was set to take place in November.

After the massive bombing in July 1946 of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem by the Irgun, the Jewish militant group led by future Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, January 1947 saw a large truck bomb detonated by another militant group, the Stern Gang, at a British police station in Haifa. This operation was led by another future Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir. March witnessed the Irgun bombing of the British Officers’ Club in Jerusalem and, in August 1947, the Haganah bombed the home of a wealthy orange grower about 10 kilometers northeast of Jaffa, killing a dozen people. The attack caused particular

consternation and fear among the citrus-growing community of the “city of oranges” (*madīnat al-burtuqāl*), as Jaffa was also known.

Jaffa proper, to be certain, saw more than its share of violence, as Subhi’s home neighborhood of Manshiyyeh was the epicenter of the 1921 and 1936 revolts, with the first leading to Tel Aviv’s municipal independence from Jaffa and the second to the first partition plan for Palestine. In between these spasms of intense violence, Palestinian resistance and intercommunal strife would grow, along with the region’s Jewish population, to the point where the British felt it necessary to destroy large swaths of the old city in 1936 to make it easier for troops to move through it when conducting operations. As Subhi recounts, for Jaffans, the destruction was “a massacre, while the British claimed it was a ‘face lift’” (p. 32). The city would witness more mundane protests against approaching partition, as Subhi experiences when a car he is riding in on the way back to Jaffa becomes stuck in traffic behind marchers shouting anti-Zionist and anti-British slogans. But neither violence nor politics were on Subhi’s mind that June. Rather, as with many fifteen-year-old boys, it was a girl who captured his imagination.

Shams is Subhi’s very own “bride of the sea” (*urūs al-baḥr*), another of Jaffa’s colorful monikers. But at two years his junior and from, in her words, a “peasant” family in the nearby village of Salameh, the chances are not very good that Subhi’s middle-class city family, who no doubt hoped to raise their economic standing alongside the general development of Jaffa, would approve such a marriage. Subhi, nevertheless, remains undeterred, as adept at concocting schemes to meet and hopefully propose to Shams as he is at fixing the most difficult mechanical problems. But, first, he needs a nice suit.

A fine tailored English suit defines the first half of *Mother of Strangers*. The suit is promised to Subhi by a wealthy orange grower, Khawaja Michael (*khawāja* being a term of respect used for wealthy Christian, Jewish, and foreign businessmen and local political leaders), if he can fix a broken irrigation system, the cause of which had eluded far more experienced mechanics. True to his burgeoning reputation, Subhi manages to discover and repair the problem, and, after an anxious couple of days caused by Khawaja Michael forgetting his promised reward, he drives Subhi to a local tailor to be fitted for a suit made of the “the best Manchester textiles” (p. 35). After several more nervous days waiting for his suit to be finished, a haircut, scrub down at the Turkish bath, and commemorative photo, Subhi is ready to show the world his best and future self: a young man ready to conquer the world, or at least Jaffa, with his fine suit and refined manners.

Why would an “English suit,” no matter how fine, “boost Subhi’s self-esteem as well as his confidence” (p. 54)? Clothing had long represented a clear marker not merely of identification but of one’s place in the broader social matrix of Jaffa. But more than a marker of class status or aspiration, Subhi’s suit is a metaphor for the city’s seemingly inexorable growth and optimism, despite competition with Tel Aviv and spasms of violence during the Mandate period. As Amiry explained to me in January 2023, when the real-life Subhi, whose story exists beyond the novel’s pages, showed her his prized possession seven decades later,

Holding the suit I realized, What’s the truth of that suit? The suit is a text in its own right, like a house is a text. For me the suit is Palestine, what happened to it. I wanted to write a story about a house—my father’s house; but I ended up writing about a suit instead because the house was occupied by Jews and they would not let me inside.

For Amiry, Subhi’s suit, his home, and the landscape and urban fabric of Jaffa more broadly have all been woven into the stories populating the pages of *Mother of Strangers*, histories that are otherwise denied to Palestinians. In her view, “People tend to discount oral history from [the] Indigenous side as somehow being less accurate, less trustworthy compared with the ‘documents’ traditionally favored by historians. But Indigenous people always know the truth far earlier than the occupier.”

In the case of Palestine, Israel confiscated, destroyed, or continues to keep from public view the vast majority of documents—official, private, or otherwise—chronicling Palestinian life before 1948. In the context of ongoing colonization, exile, and marginalization, every act of historical “rememory,” as Toni Morrison evocatively describes it, becomes a “rebellious history.” What Amiry describes as “filling in the blanks” in the lives, thoughts, and dreams of the most subaltern, censored, and silenced becomes a key skill for any good historian—or, as Amiry describes herself, *ḥakawāṭiyya*, or “storyteller”—to narrate, never mind understand, the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, or how it really happened. Yet, even under ever greater restrictions, Israeli archives, when coupled with Palestinian oral histories and documentary sources, can yield insights that can build out the larger narratives in which a book like *Mother of Strangers* takes place.

This becomes especially clear when reading through *The Lost Orchard* by Mustafa Kabha and Nahum Karlinsky, a recently published history of the Palestinian citrus industry, which covers its development during the century leading up to 1948, focusing particularly on Palestinian Arab-Jewish interactions during the Mandate period.

*The Lost Orchard* “fills in the blanks” of the larger context in which Subhi, Khawaja Michael, and other characters in *Mother of Strangers* live. The book makes three important arguments. First, the citrus industry had become the most profitable in Palestine by the Mandate period, comprising upwards of 77 percent of total exports in the 1930s, with as much as 10 percent returns on investment the norm. Second, the Palestinian citrus industry was modernizing so rapidly that it worried the ostensibly more advanced Jewish sector. Third, despite the rise in intercommunal tensions and competition in the lead-up to World War II, cooperation in the citrus industry, in fact, increased until the creation of an “official countrywide binational organization of the industry” in 1940, the Citrus Control Board, which led to coordination between the Jewish and Palestinian Arab sectors right up to the outbreak of the Palestine war in May 1948. In this context, Jaffa became “a hub of modernization for Palestinian-Arab society,” with the citrus industry “a vehicle of social mobility within Palestinian-Arab society up until the Nakba” (p. 1).

Kabha and Karlinsky’s arguments provide excellent background for Subhi’s suit, his promenade through Jaffa’s business district, and his visit to an expensive European-style café, where, looking like the scion of a wealthy citrus family, he is shown to a table and offered the full menu. Amiry does not fill in the blanks of the conversations Subhi no doubt overheard while he was drinking his coffee; they are not directly relevant to the narrative, but, after reading *The Lost Orchard*, it is not hard to imagine what they involved, given the unmistakable rise in Jaffa’s fortunes as World War II came to a close, much to the consternation of Tel Aviv’s leaders and those of the Yishuv as well. Indeed, so impressive a figure does Subhi cut with his new suit and haircut that when his uncle Habeeb, a fisherman among other things, sees him walking near the port, he angrily assumes Subhi was on the way to get married without inviting him. And indeed, as we’ve seen, marriage is very much on Subhi’s mind. We do not know, precisely, where Subhi hoped to hold his wedding, but Kabha and Karlinsky explain that wedding and betrothal parties lasting days often took place around citrus groves, especially their irrigation pools, which would be filled “with apples and oranges, as well as flowers and roses,” with the whole area “illuminated ... with colored electric bulbs” (p. 23).

Subhi might have been especially talented, but during the Mandate-era boom, most workers in and around the citrus industry saw their fortunes rise. Peasants, workers, and orchard managers (*bayārīs*) all climbed the social ladder as part of the “deep and far-reaching transformations” that were evident in the Palestinian sector (p. 86). It seems clear, then, that both Subhi’s and Shams’s families, and thousands more, could have expected their children and grandchildren to live increasingly modern and even prosperous lives as part of the general development of Jaffa and, with it, Palestine.

The fact that those expectations and dreams would be brutally dashed in 1948 is what makes it so difficult to create a narrative that does not simply become subsumed in the

pain. As Amiry put it to me: “Because there’s so much pain and shame in Palestinian society over 1948 and its aftermath, you learn to tell where things are being hidden because they’re too painful to talk about, to remember.” Her analysis tellingly evokes James Baldwin’s description of his dear friend Toni Morrison’s novels, which he believed were “very painful to read” precisely because they are, at heart, profound “stories of truth.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, my knowledge of the painful fate of the business, the land, and even the streets traversed by Subhi on a daily basis prevented me from fully enjoying the depiction of the innocence of those last months before civil war erupted in late 1947 that *Mother of Strangers* so affectively depicts. But it was not just the places and history I knew that shaped my reading of Amiry’s novel. It was also clear that there were many places along Subhi’s daily circuits that remained completely foreign to me. Many of these involved either the most intimate experiences of the body, such as baths and bordellos, or sites of physical labor, like the port and Jaffa’s citrus orchards, which had long ago disappeared, been transformed into ersatz historical-cum-tourist sites, or, just as often, were simply erased: bulldozed, remapped, and renamed with Hebrew, Zionist, or Israeli markers of identification, and, most often, emptied of their Palestinian inhabitants and replaced by Jews. While I could reach these settings through news reports, British intelligence or police files, or the documents of Zionist-led unions and intelligence organizations, few records by and for Palestinians survive to provide another view. And almost everyone who worked at these spaces are long gone, from Jaffa if not this world. I never felt comfortable during my fieldwork in the mid-late 1990s asking older Palestinian Arab Jaffans, even those I knew well, about such personal issues, which did not seem directly relevant enough to my research on the Jaffa-Tel Aviv region’s urban, architectural, and labor history to inquire about without them first broaching the topic—and no one ever did.

On the Israeli side, apart from the relatively copious archival documentation available in the Zionist and Israeli state archives, there has been no shortage of *zichronot*, or memoirs, written by Jewish militants and political figures who lived and/or operated in Jaffa, as well as ordinary Jewish residents of the city-turned-neighborhood who would serve as sources for Jewish and Israeli attempts to recover Palestinian history from their side. Some of those involved in the destruction of 1948 have, with time, come to a different perspective on violence. As one former Zionist/Israeli commander during the battle for Jaffa told Eyal Sivan in his 2009 documentary *Jaffa: The Orange’s Clockwork*, “This destroyed world still lives inside me. And with the years its presence grows more intense.” If there is a better description of the manner in which history can haunt one of its “victors,” I have not encountered it.

On the other hand, on the beach just north of the center of Old Jaffa sits one of the most violent visual, as well as political, ripostes to the previous Palestinian presence in this territory: Beit HaEtzel, or Etzel House. This structure, which rises like a shard from a forgotten war out of the sand, is a museum dedicated to the Irgun, and its design, a modernist glass structure built literally out of the half-destroyed ruin of a stone Palestinian house (Fig. 1), makes no bones about its function. Upon entry, one is greeted with Menachem Begin’s call to his troops before shelling Jaffa to “show no mercy” to its population, including, quite likely, the occupants of this particular house.

A great novel has to be at least a bit allegorical. Reality, however, is often far more painfully on the nose. The centerpiece of the action of the first half of *Mother of Strangers* is the famed Nabi Rubin festival, the month-long celebration, or *mawsim*, of the firstborn son of the Patriarch Jacob and Leah. Because it was located at a distance from the city and its environs, I didn’t explore the area or the festival’s strong ties to Jaffa’s pre-Nakba identity as much as I could have during the course of my fieldwork, even though Amiry’s husband, Salim Tamari, a Jaffa native and one of Palestine’s leading historians, had more than once gently put the

<sup>1</sup> Library of America, “Remembering Toni Morrison’s friendship with James Baldwin,” 18 February 2011, <https://www.loa.org/news-and-views/924-remembering-toni-morrison-s-friendship-with-james-baldwin>.



**Figure 1.** Beit HaEtzel/Etzel House ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Etzel\\_Musio4.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Etzel_Musio4.jpg)).

festival on my radar (and himself chronicled in his 2008 book *Mountain against the Sea*). Reading *Mother of Strangers* it is now clearer to me why. Everyone from Jaffa, regardless of class, religion, or politics, went to Nabi Rubin. It was as vital a part of the city's social fabric as any café, mosque, or orchard.

Amiry's recounting of the last festival before the war is particularly poignant, both for Jaffa's past and its future. Not surprisingly, attendees also include both Subhi's and Shams's families. Knowing this, Subhi concocts an ingenious plan to get close to Shams without arousing suspicion or anger from her family. He befriends Shams's younger brother Mohammad and offers to teach him how to make and fly kites, a favorite pastime of Jaffans and others along much of Palestine's coastline. After a day of kite-flying, and with promises of even better kites the next day, Subhi cleverly convinces Mohammad to invite his sister to an open-air movie being shown that evening. The plan works and soon Subhi is talking to his beloved, watching a film, holding her hand, and trying to figure out how to express his undying love for her, even as she reminds him that her family "are peasants, not Jaffans" (p. 112).

Aside from being charming in its own right, Amiry's narrative serves as a potent reminder that once upon a time, up until war and exile changed their lives forever, the people of Jaffa and Palestine lived utterly normal, even banal lives, engaging in the same pastimes, struggles, affairs, and journeys as people in every other society. Young men longed for their beloveds, and bought, or, if they were lucky, received suits they could not otherwise afford in order to impress them. People went to the markets and cafés and movies, purchased homes, married and divorced, and, as is clear from *Mother of Strangers*, spent time in the local bordellos where they mixed with Jews, other Europeans, and even the odd traveler from places further afield.

If the summer of 1947 provided hope for Subhi that he might succeed in obtaining Shams's affections and even consent for marriage, this sense of optimism was shattered permanently with the bombing of the Ottoman saraya, or government building, at the entrance



**Figure 2.** Jaffa saraya (Seraya building), 1897 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PikiWiki\\_Israel\\_20723\\_Cities\\_in\\_Israel.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PikiWiki_Israel_20723_Cities_in_Israel.jpg)).

to the Old City in the heart of Jaffa in January 1948 by Jewish underground forces (Fig. 2). More than any other act of violence, it was the destruction of the saraya that heralded the oncoming civil war, and, with it, the end of Jaffa as an independent Palestinian city (Fig. 3). In the coming months, as part of the increasingly brutal fighting, increasing attacks by the far better manned, organized, and equipped Jewish forces would lead to a slow and then massive exodus of the city's Palestinian population.

By June 1948, one year after Amiry's novel begins, the Jaffa of Subhi, of the author's father, of oranges and cafés, of sex and strikes, the Jaffa that for centuries welcomed strangers from near and far, was itself estranged from the communities that gave it life as 90 percent of its prewar population went into exile. Subhi's English suit, which would fray and tatter over the ensuing years and decades, became the sartorial representation of the disintegration of the social body, not just of Jaffa and its hinterland, but of Palestinian society, as a whole, as Israel arose triumphantly from the ashes of war.

The second half of *Mother of Strangers* takes us on Subhi's journey to find both Shams and his own family. Anyone who works on post-1948 Palestinian history will know this geography all too well. It begins with erasure and absence. As Amiry repeats almost twenty times in describing elements of Subhi's suddenly former life, everything, "including most tragically ... his Shams," was now "gone." Inevitably, new landscapes and topographies emerged as 750,000 Palestinians began their exile, and the remainder in what became Israel, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), and Gaza had to recreate community under one foreign rule or another.

Traveling to these locations to gather their histories requires, among other things, being publicly apolitical enough to be permitted to enter Israel, permission to visit the West Bank (it is technically illegal to visit Palestinian sites in Area A if you are Israeli), special permits (or a willingness to cross through illegal tunnels from Egypt) to visit Gaza, a second passport to visit Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria (where you still cannot enter with an Israeli stamp), and the willingness to pay exorbitant prices in Amman to visit private



**Figure 3.** Jaffa saraya, 2020 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:594-New\\_Saraya.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:594-New_Saraya.jpg)).

archives such as the library of the Nadi al-Orthodoksi (Orthodox Club) established by the former Jaffan Orthodox elite who settled there. And, if you desire to construct a more *longue durée* history, you can add in the ability to navigate third-generation negatives of centuries-old handwritten records on microfilm from the shari‘a (Islamic) courts, assuming you can find them, and a decent enough command of Ottoman Turkish to make your way through the always imposing imperial archives in Istanbul.

For many reasons, *The Lost Orchard*, coauthored by two established Palestinian and Jewish Israeli scholars, cannot follow this trajectory, first and foremost because the story of inter-communal collaboration in the citrus industry comes to an abrupt end, with the exile of 90 percent of Jaffa’s Palestinian Arab population and the wholesale Israeli Jewish takeover of the previously Palestinian economy after the 1948 war. Truth be told, even if you did follow the above trajectory, as I did, you will only just touch the surface of a centuries’ deep history that defies easy narration.

Despite the catastrophe of 1948, Subhi’s and Shams’s stories do not end with the Nakba, even if their trajectory changes dramatically and, in many ways, tragically, although less so than for many Palestinians, after the Zionist/Israeli conquest of Jaffa. And so, when a taxi driver overhears Amiry complaining about being unable to visit her father’s house as they head back to Ramallah after a rather disheartening visit, he offered to introduce her to his aunt Shams: “She has an incredible story” (p. 272). Out of that seemingly chance encounter, *Mother of Strangers* was born.

It would be giving away the most powerful and indeed unlikely, but true, plot twists in the story to recount precisely how Subhi’s, Shams’s, and their families’ stories played out in the decades after 1948, as Palestinians began creating new lives and communities in cities, towns, refugee camps, and countries far from home. But what I can say is that, after a long and fraught journey, by some sort of semi-miracle, elements of Subhi’s and Shams’s families wound up together in and around Jaffa, although in a very different configuration than Subhi had dreamt.



**Figure 4.** Suheir Riffi, untitled, 1997. Photograph by author.

Today, Jaffa is home to at least 15,000 Palestinians, along with tens of thousands of their Israeli Jewish neighbors. For its sons and daughters who could return, even just to visit, its hold remains undiminished, epitomized by figures such as the pioneering historian Ibrahim Abu Lughod, who took every opportunity, after assuming the position of vice president at Birzeit University just outside Ramallah, to travel to Jaffa, put on his bathing suit, and swim again at the beach where, joined by Palestinians coming from across the country, he had bathed daily in his youth.

At least one time, after a conference he organized at Birzeit in 1998 where I presented my almost finished dissertation, Abu Lughod managed to convince Edward Said to accompany him and Salim Tamari to Jaffa for a swim. As we ate lunch in the university cafeteria in between sessions, I sat in rapt attention as they discussed the logistics of going through



the increasingly byzantine and aggressive Israeli checkpoints from Ramallah to Jaffa in a car with a Palestinian American with a US passport (Abu Lughod), a West Bank Palestinian without official permission to enter Israel (Tamari), and the world's most famous, and for the Israeli political establishment, more or less hated, Palestinian (Said). I didn't have the courage to ask to join them, but if I remember correctly, a good time was had by all.

As Said argued in his still groundbreaking 1984 essay "Permission to Narrate," in any great historical novel "there is an active sympathy at work." As his work reminds us, the historical novel has a long history, whether the highly detailed novelistic histories composed from "personally verified truth" in 18th-century England or the "critical fabrications" deployed by African American and many contemporary Indigenous writers to recover verbatim the truths of experience too thoroughly and brutally censored, silenced. In such a situation, writers, like all artists or scholars, have little choice but to operate beyond linear documentary conceptions of the past in order to create narratives of survival in the present.

This doubleness of history, as a set of procedures for the rigorous scrutiny of sources and a highly aesthetic and affective literary form, has never been more apparent or important. Claims for recognition, representation, and justice are racing to keep pace with increasingly dire threats to land, people, and memory in a necrocapitalist world system operating, as the fictitious general who sends Martin Sheen upriver in *Apocalypse Now* explained, "without any decent restraint." As both *Mother of Strangers* and *The Lost Orchard* illustrate in very different ways, how to train a new generation of what Sayyid Mahmoud has called "storyteller historians" (sing. *al-mu'arrikh al-ḥakawātī*) and its interdisciplinary equivalents could not be a more urgent question today for Middle East studies and academia, more broadly.

As for the few thousand Jaffans who remained in the city, or migrated there in the years after 1948 from other parts of what became Israel, their struggle and perseverance is well-captured by a local artist, Suheir Riffi, whose untitled 1997 painting for an art exhibit on contemporary Palestine depicted a woman in conservative dress, cradling an infant, whose feet are replaced by roots linking her deep into the earth and to her the foundation of her dilapidated home (Fig. 4). Like Subhi and Shams, they remain rooted in Jaffa; not strangers, but travelers, however wearily (and sometimes temporarily), returning home.