

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# New Arab Maids: Female Domestic Work, “New Arab Women,” and National Memory in British Mandate Palestine

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## Abstract

The “new Arab woman” of the early 20th century has received much recent scholarly attention. According to the middle- and upper-class ideal, this woman was expected to strengthen the nation by efficiently managing her household, educating her children, and contributing to social causes. Yet, we cannot fully understand the “new Arab woman” without studying the domestic workers who allowed this class to exist. Domestic workers carried out much of the physical labor that let their mistresses pursue new standards of domesticity, social engagement, and participation in nationalist organizations. This article examines relationships between Arab housewives and female domestic workers in British Mandate Palestine (1920–1948) through an analysis of domestic reform articles and memoirs. Arab domestic reformers argued that elite housewives, in order to become truly modern women, had to treat maids with greater respect and adjust to the major socioeconomic changes that peasants were experiencing, yet still maintain a clear hierarchy in the home. Palestinian memoirists, meanwhile, often imagine their pre-1948 homes as a site of Palestinian national solidarity. Their memories of intimate relationships that developed between elite families and peasant maids have crucially shaped nationalist narratives that celebrate the Palestinian peasantry.

**Keywords:** Arab women; British Mandate Palestine; domestic work

Ghada Karmi’s mother, Umm Ziyad, had all the markings of a middle-class “new Arab woman.” After growing up in a modest Damascus home, she married a Palestinian man with a promising career as a civil servant in British Mandate Palestine (1920–1948). By the late 1930s, Umm Ziyad could pride herself on managing a well-furnished home in the new, upscale western Jerusalem neighborhood of Qatamon.<sup>1</sup> She sported the latest European fashions and adopted the dress, hairstyles, and silk stockings of Egyptian film stars.<sup>2</sup> Umm Ziyad’s busy daily routine included cooking, socializing, and running her household. She hosted weekly gatherings of women in her home (*istiqbalat*), where they discussed their husbands, children, and issues of the day. Some of Umm Ziyad’s friends participated in women’s national organizations like the Palestine Arab Women’s Congress, and although Umm Ziyad herself did not join she did support the humanitarian aspects of their work.<sup>3</sup>

Umm Ziyad’s “new” middle-class identity depended on something else, too. Or rather on someone else: Fatima al-Basha, who worked as a maid in the Karmi household. Fatima’s daily labor made Umm Ziyad’s middle-class status possible. Fatima’s help with cleaning ensured that Umm Ziyad’s home could receive a constant stream of guests. Fatima’s care of the Karmi children allowed Umm Ziyad to spend afternoons socializing with friends while her kids stayed at home. Even Fatima’s clothing—the embroidered *thawb* (full-length robe) that she wore, which Umm Ziyad and her middle-class friends would not “have been seen dead in”—allowed Umm Ziyad to define her own status against that of her Palestinian

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<sup>1</sup>Ghada Karmi, *In Search of Fatima* (London: Verso, 2002), 50–51.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 30–31.

peasant counterpart.<sup>4</sup> In short, the identities of Umm Ziyad and Fatima al-Basha were co-constitutive. Umm Ziyad was a middle-class woman because Fatima was the family's lower-class servant.

The study of domestic workers is crucial to understanding Arab class formation and the idea of the "new Arab woman" in the early 20th century. By "new Arab woman" I refer to both an ideal and a material reality. According to the upper- and middle-class ideal that developed in the late 19th century, the "new Arab woman" was expected to participate in strengthening the nation by efficiently running a reformed household, educating her children, and contributing to social causes.<sup>5</sup> On a material level, many women like Umm Ziyad were characterized as new in that they were newly middle class; their standards of living had risen over their lifetimes. But their new living standards were often accompanied by additional housework. At a time when household labor was physically taxing and largely done by hand, maids allowed these "new" middle-class Arab women to exist. Although domestic workers like Fatima did not entirely free their mistresses from household chores, they did carry out much of the manual labor that let their employers pursue new standards of domesticity, social engagement, and participation in nationalist organizations.

This article examines the relationships between maids and mistresses through an analysis of Arab domestic reform articles and memoirs, with a focus on Palestine under the British Mandate. The story of Arab middle-class women and domestic workers does not stand apart from the more familiar narratives of colonialism, nationalism, and modernity that dominate early 20th-century Palestinian history. Instead of treating the home as feminized and depoliticized, this article builds on Sherene Seikaly's call to understand the political in Palestine "as the stuff of the everyday."<sup>6</sup> Although Arab domestic reformers often termed the home a "sanctuary" from the outside world, in reality they promoted the home, the primary location of mistress-maid contact, as an important site for shaping political and social relations. It was widely believed that political self-determination required social progress and reform of the home. To be truly modern, the mistress had to govern her "kingdom" with fairness, professionalism, and poise. Arab domestic reformers like Salwa Sa'id and Julia Tu'ma Dimashqiyya called on elite, modern women to abandon the ways of their female predecessors and adopt reformed, more respectful relationships with their maids. Reformers also recognized that Arab domestic workers were themselves undergoing major social transformation brought on by an increase in urban wage labor under British rule, ongoing land dispossession, national conflict, contact with foreigners, and increased access to education and new technologies. Mistresses needed to adapt to such changes and train Palestinian domestic workers to be useful and self-respecting national subjects. The message of domestic reformers was at times progressive but was not egalitarian: improvements in mistress-maid relations, they argued, would ensure that maids continued to respect their mistresses' authority. Improvements in relations would also ensure that Arab peasant maids did not leave Arab homes to work in the homes of foreigners in Palestine.

Middle- and upper-class Palestinian memoirists writing in the post-1948 (post-*Nakba*) period also construct the home as a site of politics, and specifically of Palestinian national solidarity. Unlike Arab domestic reform literature that encouraged housewives to maintain a clear boundary between themselves and their employees, Palestinian memoirists recall the close, emotional bonds that developed between their own elite families and their Palestinian peasant maids. By blurring the mistress-maid class distinctions, these writers "sanitize" hierarchical class relationships and construct the home as a site of national harmony between urban elites and rural peasants.<sup>7</sup> Domestic spaces become a site of politicized "nostalgic energy."<sup>8</sup> In recalling their urban, middle-class childhoods, the Palestinian writers sentimentally describe the trips

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>5</sup>On the history and development of this "new Arab woman," see, for example, Lila Abu-Lughod, ed., *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Mona Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863–1922* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its "New" Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); and Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing and Liberating Egypt, 1805–1923* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 14.

<sup>7</sup>I borrow this term from Swapna Banerjee, in "Down Memory Lane: Representations of Domestic Workers in Middle Class Personal Narratives of Colonial Bengal," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 3 (2004): 681–708, 694.

<sup>8</sup>Ann L. Stoler and Karen Strassler use this term in "Castings for the Colonial: Memory Work in 'New Order' Java," *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 42, no. 1 (2000): 4–48, quote on 10.

they took to their maids' homes in villages as formative experiences that shaped their understanding of Palestinian peasant culture. As we will see, the elite children's intimate relationships with peasant maids and their memories of "simple" village life crucially shape contemporary Palestinian nationalist narratives that glorify the peasantry.<sup>9</sup>

Arab middle-class women have received much recent scholarly attention. Historians have traced the emergence of a distinct Arab middle class in Eastern Mediterranean cities in the last decades of Ottoman rule.<sup>10</sup> Members of this class differentiated themselves from the urban poor and rural peasants, on the one hand, and from the "old social class" of Sunni Muslim notables on the other, through "particular cultural and social bonds."<sup>11</sup> Historians also have broadened definitions of Arab middle-class identity beyond traditional markers of class like wealth, education, and professions to include characteristics such as "modern" cultural habits, consumption, taste, and ideals of domesticity.<sup>12</sup> Yet this scholarship tends to overlook a central component of the formation of the middle class: domestic workers.<sup>13</sup>

The growth of the urban Arab middle class in mandatory Palestine corresponded with a dramatic increase in Arab wage labor, which resulted from the growing capitalist economy, expanding markets, and shifts in land-holding patterns. All of these changes shaped popular attitudes toward Zionist settlement, British colonial rule, and Palestinian nationalism.<sup>14</sup> The growth of Jerusalem as a colonial capital, in particular, brought peasants into the economic sphere of the city through urban immigration and the widening economic network between the city and its surrounding villages and towns.<sup>15</sup> Domestic work was an important but overlooked category of urban Palestinian wage labor. The 1931 Palestine census recorded 10,146 paid domestic workers classified as "earners."<sup>16</sup> Of the total population of Palestine, about one in one hundred was a paid domestic worker. Palestinian Arab domestic workers were employed in the homes of British officials and Jews as well as middle-class and elite Palestinian Arabs. Muslim and Christian women were far more represented in the sector of domestic work than in any other working sector, such as agriculture or industry.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, much Arab domestic labor went unrecorded in census data, and some, as we will see, was coercive.

The female domestic workers in this study were part of the Palestinian working class. Domestic work required both physical and emotional labor. Maids lived by this work, and their social standing was

<sup>9</sup>On the celebration and memory of the Palestinian peasantry, see Rosemary Sayigh, *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Books, 1979); and Ted Swedenburg, "The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier," *Anthropological Quarterly* 63, no.1 (1990): 18–30.

<sup>10</sup>For example, Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, *A Taste for Home: The Modern Middle Class in Ottoman Beirut* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup>Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 2.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 8; Relli Shechter, ed., *Transitions in Domestic Consumption and Family Life in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014); Seikaly, *Men of Capital*; Abou-Hodeib, *Taste for Home*.

<sup>13</sup>For example, Khater, *Inventing Home*; Shechter, *Transitions*; Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*; and Abou-Hodeib, *Taste for Home*. Sherene Seikaly is an important exception. In *Men of Capital* (72–74), Seikaly analyzes Salwa Sa'id's domestic reform advice on mistress-maid relations as a way to understand the Palestinian "women of thrift." Ray Jureidini also highlights the historiographical absence of domestic workers in his study, "In the Shadows of Family Life: Toward a History of Domestic Service in Lebanon," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (2009): 74–101.

<sup>14</sup>As Rachel Taquu has shown, the transition to wage labor was accompanied by changes in social loyalties and identities of *fellah* workers. See "Peasants into Workmen: Internal Labor Migration and the Arab Village Community under the Mandate," in *Palestinian Society and Politics*, ed. Joel S. Migdal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 261–86.

<sup>15</sup>As Rana Barakat details, as Jerusalem became home to a growing number of nonelite Palestinians, the city witnessed dramatic demographic and social shifts; "The Jerusalem Fellah: Popular Politics in Mandate-Era Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41, no. 1 (2016): 7–19, quote on 9.

<sup>16</sup>Of these, 6,238 were female and 3,908 were male. E. Mills, *Palestine Census, 1931, Part I: Report*, vol. 1 (Alexandria, VA: Whitehead Morris, 1933), 299. Just under 1.8 percent of the settled population in Palestine was economically supported by paid domestic service work, as either "earners" or "dependents." By religion, 1.17 percent of the Muslim population, 3.02 percent of the Jewish population, and 4.11 percent of the Christian population was supported by domestic service work (316).

<sup>17</sup>In 1931, Muslim women made up 39.2 percent of all Muslim domestic workers in Palestine; by contrast, Muslim women made up 7.2 percent of all Muslim workers in "agriculture and raw materials" and 3.9 percent of all Muslim workers in "industry, trade, and transport." Among Christians, 59.5 percent of the domestic service workers were women; among Jews, 82.9 percent of the domestic service workers were women. Sa'id B. Himadeh, ed., *Economic Organization of Palestine* (Beirut: American Press, 1938), 35.

shaped by it. Many had to travel daily from their villages to urban neighborhoods for work. Yet scholarship on the Palestinian working class, and on the working class more broadly, often excludes the study of female domestic workers for a number of reasons.<sup>18</sup> First, economists and labor historians have traditionally understood domestic labor as “not work” because it does not involve commodity production.<sup>19</sup> Second, domestic workers generally fall outside studies of organized labor movements. The setting of domestic employment in the home rather than in public spaces like shops or offices made it difficult for domestic workers to organize.<sup>20</sup> Nor did Arab domestic workers necessarily benefit from the successes of labor organizing. In Syria and Lebanon, for example, the new labor codes and pay raises achieved in the interwar period excluded the majority of domestic workers.<sup>21</sup> Finally, scholarship focusing either on the Arab urban elite or on rural peasants has overlooked female domestic workers, whose lives were often neither entirely urban nor entirely rural.<sup>22</sup> In fact, domestic workers served as an important link between urban and rural Palestine.

Domestic work in European colonial contexts beyond the Arab world has received recent scholarly attention, but Arab domestic work in the early 20th century remains little studied.<sup>23</sup> Historians of European colonialism have revealed how the home, and specifically mistress-maid relations, served as an “intimate frontier” between the colonizer and the colonized. This article demonstrates that the “contested terrain” of intimate spaces like the home served as a site where relations of power were negotiated not only between the colonizers and colonized but also among individuals within colonized and emerging national communities, like the diverse Arab population in Palestine.<sup>24</sup> In such contexts, the home served simultaneously as a site of national solidarity and a site for securing class boundaries within the national community.

How do we write a history that includes Palestinian domestic workers in light of the lack of written sources penned by the workers themselves? This article examines sources written primarily by Arab middle- and upper-class writers. Rather than attempting to fully “recover” the voices of Palestinian domestic workers, it seeks to capture only the existing fragments of their experiences.<sup>25</sup> I am particularly inspired by Abigail McGowan’s call to question the “authority of reformed housewives” and to ask: How

<sup>18</sup>On the exclusion of domestic workers from the working class and histories of the working class in Britain, see Selina Todd, “Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900–1950,” *Past and Present* 203, no. 1 (2009), 181–204.

<sup>19</sup>Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22. For a recent critique of this narrow understanding of labor history, see Christian G. De Vito, Juliane Schiel, and Matthias van Rossum, “From Bondage to Precariousness? New Perspectives on Labor and Social History,” *Journal of Social History* (forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup>Todd, “Domestic Service,” 189.

<sup>21</sup>Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 161, 281.

<sup>22</sup>Domestic workers also came from poor urban households. See Rochelle Davis, “The Growth of the Western Communities, 1917–1948,” in *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighborhoods and Their Fate in the War*, ed. Salim Tamari (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies and Badil Resource Center, 1999), 32–66, quote on 34. On the Palestinian peasant economy, see, for instance, Amos Nadan, *The Palestinian Peasant Economy under the Mandate: A Story of Colonial Bungling* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, Olivia Robinson, “Traveling Ayahs of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Global Networks and Mobilization of Agency,” *History Workshop Journal* 86 (2018): 44–66; and Annelise Heinz and Elizabeth LaCouture, eds., “Unsettling Domesticities: New Histories of Home in Global Contexts,” *American Historical Review* 124, no. 4 (2019): 1246–336. For sociological and anthropological studies on migrant domestic workers in the contemporary Arab world, see Ray Jureidini, “Sexuality and the Servant: An Exploration of Arab Images of the Sexuality of Domestic Maids Living in the Household,” in *Sexuality in the Arab World*, ed. S. Khalaf and J. Gagnon (London: Saqi Books, 2006); Attiya Ahmad, *Everyday Conversions: Islam, Domestic Work, and South Asian Migrant Women in Kuwait* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); and Sumayya Kassamali, “Migrant Worker Lifeworlds of Beirut” (diss., Columbia University, 2017).

<sup>24</sup>See Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (2001): 833.

<sup>25</sup>Here I follow the approach of Banerjee, “Down Memory Lane,” 683. I cannot know how the experiences of domestic workers might “speak back” to the archive of elite figures presented here. As Stoler and Strassler write, scholars often assume that domestic service typified the subaltern condition, and they make assumptions about the home and domestic work as a site of “intimate humiliation, contempt and disdain” in which “subaltern power accrues.” But in their research on the memories of Indonesian domestic servants in Dutch colonial homes, Stoler and Strassler found that the former servants’ testimony did not contain the affect expressed in colonial memoirs or assumed in scholarly works. As they write: “Accounts of former house servants often speak past, rather than back to, the colonial archive and the nostalgic memories of their Dutch employers.” See “Castings for the Colonial,” 11.

did servants shape domestic experiences and give meaning to household management?<sup>26</sup> How did maids carry out their own agendas through their work? I use two main sources: first, women's magazines and radio programs on domestic reform for middle- and upper-class female audiences; and, second, autobiographies and memoirs written by Palestinian men and women who grew up with domestic workers in their homes. By comparing prescriptive and descriptive texts, this article illustrates that individuals did not always live according to the "proper" domestic procedures described in prescriptive texts. The idea of "domesticity," after all, was often merely aspirational.<sup>27</sup>

The article proceeds in three parts. First, I review definitions of the Arab middle class in Palestine. Second, I closely analyze early 20th-century domestic reform literature that describes how new Arab women should treat their maids and servants. I focus specifically on the Beirut-based women's magazine *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* (The New Woman) and the Palestinian radio program, *al-Bayt al-'Arabi al-Jadid* (The New Arab Home). Finally, I turn to autobiographies penned by middle- and upper-class Palestinian men and women. I supplement this analysis with studies of public debates and fiction literature produced in mandatory Palestine. My focus throughout the article is predominantly on the Jerusalem area, as Jerusalem was the site of the largest upper-middle-class Palestinian Arab population during the Mandate period and a "magnet" for educated Palestinians.<sup>28</sup>

### Defining the Palestinian Arab Middle Class

Scholarship on Arabs in early 20th-century Palestine tends to focus on either peasants or notables. As Seikaly writes, historians generally portray Palestinian social life as "peopled by poor, illiterate masses of peasants and workers, alongside a group of venal notables fraught with internecine competition."<sup>29</sup> More recently, scholars have traced the emergence of a Palestinian "middle class," or "middling classes," in the late 19th century.<sup>30</sup> But defining precisely who constituted this middle class is not always easy. As in late colonial India, middle-class status in Palestine was under frequent revision according to economic and cultural standards.<sup>31</sup> Under British Mandate rule in Palestine, an Arab middle class grew with the development of urban centers, the spread of local education, the rapidly growing economy, and the increasing professional opportunities created by the British administration.<sup>32</sup> The middle class in this period comprised disproportionately, but certainly not exclusively, Christian Arabs.<sup>33</sup>

Education stood at the center of the new Arab middle-class identity.<sup>34</sup> The educational status of the man of the household, as Seikaly writes, was the defining factor of the Arab middle class.<sup>35</sup> Men who studied at European missionary schools gained knowledge and skills needed to fill important roles in the civil administrations of the British and French mandatory governments.<sup>36</sup> Arab nationalists also

<sup>26</sup>Abigail McGowan, "The Materials of Home: Studying Domesticity in Late Colonial India," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 4 (2019): 1302–15.

<sup>27</sup>As Antoinette Burton writes, "Domesticity has always been a work in progress: unfinished business, in the sense of incomplete and aspirational"; "Toward Unsettling Histories of Domesticity," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 4 (2019): 1332–36, quote on 1332.

<sup>28</sup>Itamar Radai, "The Rise and Fall of the Palestinian-Arab Middle Class under the British Mandate, 1920–39," *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 3 (2016): 487–506, quote on 490.

<sup>29</sup>Sherene Seikaly, "Men of Capital in Mandate Palestine," *Rethinking Marxism* 30, no. 3 (2018): 393–417, quote on 401.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid. Seikaly terms this group the "middling class" and "men of capital." See also Salim Tamari, *Mountain Against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009). Many scholars have adopted the term *efendiyya* to describe the men of this emerging middle class in the Arab East. The *efendiyya* in Egypt, as Lucie Ryzova writes, graduated from modern educational institutions and proclaimed themselves "modern." Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*; Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>31</sup>McGowan, "Materials of Home," 1307.

<sup>32</sup>Deborah Bernstein and Badi Hasisi, "'Buy and Promote the National Cause': Consumption, Class Formation and Nationalism in Mandate Palestinian Society," *Nations and Nationalism* 14, no. 1 (2008): 127–50, quote on 131.

<sup>33</sup>Radai, "Rise and Fall," 489–90.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 493.

<sup>35</sup>Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 58.

<sup>36</sup>Radai, "Rise and Fall," 490. For example, on the role of the American University of Beirut in educating Arab civil servants in the British and French Mandates, see Hilary Falb Kalisman, "Bursary Scholars at the American University of Beirut: Living and Practising Arab Unity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 4 (2015): 599–617.

increasingly viewed girls' education as necessary for women to properly run their households, now deemed the site of national progress.<sup>37</sup> Beyond education, Palestinian Arabs expressed their middle-class identity by espousing modern practices, ideas, and consumption habits. They consumed Western music, literature, and movies and emphasized the importance of sports. Palestinian middle-class women often dressed according to the latest European fashions, buying garments and furniture at Spinneys department stores.<sup>38</sup> But imitation alone did not characterize this class; rather, what typified its members was a hybridity of Eastern and Western consumption habits.<sup>39</sup> Arab reformers further emphasized *moderate* consumption, differentiating between "need and luxury" as a way to distinguish the "model middle" from those they viewed as unreformed elites.<sup>40</sup>

The home was perhaps the most crucial site for middle-class Arab women to articulate their identity. In Palestine, as across the Eastern Mediterranean, the home had come to symbolize more than a physical structure. It had become, as Toufoul Abou-Hodeib shows regarding late-Ottoman Beirut, a "contentious site of struggle over defining the meaning of modernity."<sup>41</sup> In Mandate-era Palestine, upper- and middle-class Arabs built international-style houses in new urban neighborhoods like Qatamon, Talbiyya, and Baq'a in western Jerusalem.<sup>42</sup> Because the home was widely acknowledged as the place where Arab families spent most of their time and where future (male) citizens were raised, it required careful management. "New" Arab women were called on to be responsible household managers. They were encouraged to maintain their homes as clean, attractive "sanctuaries" from the outside world.<sup>43</sup> As the reformer Julia Tu'ma Dimashqiyya (1882–1954) proclaimed in a 1910 speech in Tripoli, the home was "a shelter for the woman, a kingdom for the mother, a place of jollity for the man, a promenade for the father, and a pasture of well-being and joy for the children."<sup>44</sup>

Advocates for such domestic reform in Palestine, or the Palestinian "domestic awakening" (*al-nahda al-manziliyya*), drew on Ottoman, European, and Arab discourses of scientific housekeeping and gendered domestic practices.<sup>45</sup> Their directives coincided with calls for a "women's awakening" (*al-nahda al-nisa'iyya*) in which middle-class and elite Arab women were summoned to participate in the public sphere through charity work, literary circles, and education. It is precisely these paradoxical calls for reformed women to increase their participation both within and outside the house that made paid domestic work so central to the pursuit of becoming a new woman.<sup>46</sup> Domestic workers allowed middle-class and elite women to partake in both these realms by providing help with housework and childcare and granting them more time for activities outside the home. As a result, the servant became a defining component of the new ideal middle-class household in Palestine. The "model middle" family, according to the Palestinian journal *al-Iqtisadiyyat al-'Arabiyya* (The Arab Economic Journal), comprised "an educated man who has a wife and two children and a servant."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Examples include Qasim Amin, Butrus al-Bustani, and Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi. Ela Greenberg, *Preparing the Mothers of Tomorrow: Education and Islam in Mandate Palestine* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>38</sup>Radai, "Rise and Fall," 494, 497.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 497. See Seikaly (*Men of Capital*, 58) on the importance of "Eastern" values in Palestinian consumption. Toufoul Abou-Hodeib shows how the Arab middle class in Beirut attempted to distinguish itself from both the wealthier classes and the *ifranji*, or European, culture; "Taste and Class in Late Ottoman Beirut," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 3 (2011): 475–92, quote on 476.

<sup>40</sup>Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 55. As Abou-Hodeib argues, the criticism of wealthier classes by Arab intellectuals contrasts with Pierre Bourdieu's conception of "downward self-demarcation," in which the working class functions as the "negative reference point"; "Taste and Class," 481.

<sup>41</sup>Abou-Hodeib, "Taste and Class," 476.

<sup>42</sup>Radai, "Rise and Fall," 490–92. On the "New City" versus the "Old City" of Jerusalem in mandatory Palestine, see Rochelle Davis, "Growing Up Palestinian in Jerusalem before 1948: Childhood Memories of Communal Life, Education, and Political Awareness," in *Jerusalem Interrupted: Modernity and Colonial Transformation 1917–Present*, ed. Lena Jayyusi (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2015), 187–210.

<sup>43</sup>On the "new" woman's duties in the home, see Mona Russell, "Modernity, National Identity, and Consumerism: Visions of the Egyptian Home, 1805–1922," in Shechter, *Transitions in Domestic Consumption* 43. Notably, some articles in women's journals also questioned and criticized the public-private dichotomy and the "cult of domesticity." See Khater, *Inventing Home*, 16.

<sup>44</sup>"Al Sama' al-Ula," pt. 1, *al-Hasna'*, June 1910, 12, cited in Abou-Hodeib, "Taste and Class," 479.

<sup>45</sup>Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 53.

<sup>46</sup>On this paradox, see Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, 8.

<sup>47</sup>Quoted in Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 57 (emphasis added).

## Maid in Domestic Reform Literature

It is no surprise, then, that servants—and female maids in particular—featured frequently in the pages of Arab women’s magazines across the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>48</sup> Domestic reformers writing in these magazines urged readers, assumed to be middle- and upper-class housewives, to reform their relations with their maids. Doing so, they argued, would allow the readers to become truly modern women. Reformers discursively defined a new middle class that depended on the exclusion of peasant maids on the one hand and a critique of despotic, unreformed elite women on the other. This section will focus in particular on two domestic reform programs: Julia Tu’ma Dimashqiyya’s Beirut-based journal *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* (The New Woman; 1921–26), in which a section titled “al-Bayt” (The Home) featured stories on how women should interact with their maids; and Salwa Sa’id’s radio program *al-Bayt al-‘Arabi al-Jadid* (The New Arab Home, 1940–41), which was broadcast by the Arabic section of the Palestine Broadcasting Service and published in the popular Palestinian newspaper *Filastin*.<sup>49</sup> The newspaper ran a three-part segment called “al-Khadima wa-l-Khadim” (The Maid and the Manservant). Both sources recognized the political and social stakes of domestic reform: if readers did not correct their treatment of maids, they would lose their own social identity as “new” women and would also lose their maids to the homes of “foreigners.”

We might be tempted to dismiss the attempts of domestic reformers to professionalize women’s roles as “household managers” as an empty rearticulation of women’s traditional roles in the home. Doing so, however, would overlook an important historical shift at play. As Afsaneh Najmabadi argues in the Iranian context, prior to the late 19th century the father/husband figure was assumed to be the household manager and family educator, whereas the wife and mother was seen simply as part of the household. With the rise of reformist literature in the late 19th century, the role of the ideal wife and mother began to shift: the wife—and not her husband—was now expected to be a responsible household manager, educator, and companionate spouse. This conceptual shift, as Najmabadi writes, contained “emancipatory possibilities” for women, yet also served as a disciplinary tool.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in the Arab Eastern Mediterranean, the professionalization of elite women’s roles as housewives granted these women power over their households, leading to a social hierarchy between mistress and maid within the home.

The editors of the reformist women’s magazines and radio programs were educated, elite Arab women. Julia Tu’ma Dimashqiyya was born into a Protestant family in the Shuf region of southern Lebanon. After completing her own schooling, she worked as an educator at girls’ schools in Beirut.<sup>51</sup> In *al-Mar’a al-Jadida*, Dimashqiyya encouraged female readers to adopt new, post-World War I roles in social and national realms.<sup>52</sup> *Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* contained a broad range of articles about women in history, child-rearing and pedagogy, and monthly household budget schedules, as well as recipes and advice on marriage and “modern love.” It published articles on the status of women beyond the Arab world, from China to England to Turkey.<sup>53</sup> Salwa Sa’id, a graduate of the American University of Beirut and the daughter of a former mayor of Beirut, was likely exposed to magazines like *al-Mar’a al-Jadida*. Sa’id married a Palestinian Lebanese man and moved to Palestine, where she hosted the weekly radio program *al-Bayt al-‘Arabi al-Jadid*.<sup>54</sup> In Sa’id’s words, the program aimed to give women advice on “the home, economy, order, and assuring family happiness.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>48</sup>For a list of women’s magazines published in the first decade of the 20th century, see Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 294–95, and Khater, *Inventing Home*, 224n88.

<sup>49</sup>*Al-Bayt al-‘Arabi al-Jadid* can also be translated as “The new Arab house.” Andrea Stanton argues that the publication of Sa’id’s program in *Filastin* was part of a conscious plan to promote a “modern, progressive, urban, and bourgeois identity for Arab Palestine”; “*This Is Jerusalem Calling*”: *State Radio in Mandate Palestine* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013), 142.

<sup>50</sup>Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Crafting an Educated Housewife,” in Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, 91–94.

<sup>51</sup>Abou-Hodeib, “Taste and Class,” 489n17. See also Michel Jiha, *Julia Tu’ma Dimashqiyya* (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyes Books, 2003); and Abou-Hodeib, *Taste for Home*, 115–17.

<sup>52</sup>Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 121.

<sup>53</sup>For instance, “Marriage in China,” *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 1, no. 4 (1921): 112; “The Syrian Family,” *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 1, no. 5 (1921): 143; “The Turkish Woman,” *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 1, no. 5 (1921): 194; “The New Woman in the New Europe,” *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 2, no. 3 (1922): 78; “The Woman in Japan,” *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 2, no. 4 (1922): 126; and “The Women’s Awakening in Brazil,” *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 2, no. 5 (1922): 155.

<sup>54</sup>Stanton, “*Jerusalem Calling*,” 143.

<sup>55</sup>*Filastin*, 26 January 1941, quoted in Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 62.

Dimashqiyya's and Sa'id's messages were primarily addressed to an Arab middle- and upper-class female audience.<sup>56</sup> Dimashqiyya addressed each volume of *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* to "daughters of my country," and Sa'id spoke to her "Arab sisters." *Al-Mar'a al-Jadida*, although based in Beirut, reached women in Palestine. Serene Husseini Shahid, who grew up in a wealthy Jerusalem family, remembered that her aunt subscribed to a number of women's magazines, including *al-Mar'a al-Jadida*, which Serene and her cousin Hind eagerly read as young girls.<sup>57</sup> Elite Palestinian Arab women also read similar magazines in English. Hala Sakakini remembered that her mother subscribed to an English women's magazine called *Wife and Home*, to which Hala and her sister Dumiya, in their early teens, "soon became addicted."<sup>58</sup>

Both domestic reform programs—*al-Mar'a al-Jadida* and *al-Bayt al-'Arabi al-Jadid*—encouraged "new" Arab housewives or "ladies of the home" (using the terms *sayyidat al-bayt* and *rabbat al-manzil*) to embrace their positions as household managers. The educated new woman, Sa'id wrote, was not like her predecessor, who "did not know about her house when she entered it except the name of its owner."<sup>59</sup> The modern woman had domestic knowledge, but she also had a number of duties beyond attending to her household that her mother had not had, including visiting friends, reading the news, and taking part in charity organizations and reading groups.<sup>60</sup> How was the new woman to juggle all of these modern expectations? Sa'id conceded that there was no way other than to employ the help of a maid (*khadima*). Indeed this maid—who would attend to daily chores like sweeping, mopping, cleaning, laundry, and ironing—was "necessary for our existence."<sup>61</sup> An article in *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* similarly acknowledged the "essential work" that maids and servants undertook: "If the greatest doctor in the country were forced to clean his room, wash the floor, dust it, cook his food, and wash his clothes . . . what time would remain for him to give consultations and conduct surgeries?"<sup>62</sup>

Both reform programs cautioned that contemporary Arab mistress-maid relations were far from ideal.<sup>63</sup> In Palestine, Sa'id wrote, Arab maids often chose to work in "foreigners' homes," which we can infer to mean British or European Jewish homes. This was partly because of the "high salaries" that foreigners paid, which Sa'id did not consider "a disease without medication."<sup>64</sup> Rather, Sa'id urged her listeners to look inward at their own treatment of maids. Bad management of maids by Arab housewives, she wrote, "causes most of them to prefer employment with foreigners rather than with us [Arabs]."<sup>65</sup> Poor management had social consequences: if Arab housewives did not attend to their managerial shortcomings, they would be forced to return to doing all of the housework themselves.<sup>66</sup>

The good news was that proper household management could be learned. As *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* put it, "good management requires knowledge, and knowledge does not come automatically."<sup>67</sup> The reformers detailed all of the mistress's duties vis-à-vis her maid—from hiring to firing—so as "to guarantee order of her small kingdom."<sup>68</sup> First, both programs cautioned the housewives against "criticizing and complaining" about their servants and blaming them for poor mistress-maid relations.<sup>69</sup> In reality, it was "the

<sup>56</sup>As Stanton notes, Sa'id's imagined audience had to be able to afford a radio to tune into her show; "Jerusalem Calling," 145.

<sup>57</sup>Serene Husseini Shahid, *Jerusalem Memories* (Beirut: Nafal, 2000), 48–53.

<sup>58</sup>Hala Sakakini, *Jerusalem and I: A Personal Record*, 2nd ed. (Amman: n.p., 1990), 34.

<sup>59</sup>*Filastin*, 9 March 1941, 1.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>"Al-Bayt," *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 4 (1925): 165.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>With regard to the salary problem, Sa'id advised cooperating with the "foreigners," especially the British, to designate an agreed-upon salary for each service requested. She also suggested that articles be written on this subject in British newspapers; *Filastin*, 16 March 1941, 1–2. On Arab domestic workers in British homes, see A. J. Sherman, *Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine, 1918–1948* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 56–58.

<sup>65</sup>*Filastin*, 16 March 1941, 1–2.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>*Al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 5 (1925): 211.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid. The use of "kingdom" here is noteworthy: it assumes that the housewife, as the "queen" of this kingdom, is a fair yet still absolute ruler. The reformers gave housewives very detailed instructions. For example, if a servant died and left behind a poor family, the housewife was to give the family a full month's salary; *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 4 (1925): 165, and *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 7 (1925): 293–94. If the mistress wanted to fire a servant, she must notify the servant a full month ahead of time; *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 4 (1925): 165.

<sup>69</sup>*Filastin*, 16 March 1941, 1–2.



mistress's poor administration and . . . shortage of wisdom" in her treatment of servants that caused most mistress-maid disputes.<sup>70</sup> Second, reformers encouraged housewives to adapt to their servants' changing lives. Sa'id warned that the expectations of Palestinian peasants were shifting due to increased access to education, radio, and movie theaters, as well as more mixing with foreigners. These changes had a major influence on the "development of [the maids'] intellectual character."<sup>71</sup> According to *al-Mar'a al-Jadida*, the "third rank's" improved schooling increased their "spirit of independence" and "desire for raising their social standing," leading them at times to decline domestic service positions.<sup>72</sup>

Third, to make their maids obedient, respectful, and loyal employees—and in turn, national subjects—housewives would need to professionalize their managerial roles in the home. *Al-Mar'a al-Jadida* instructed housewives on how to legally obtain domestic workers, warning against the use of brokers (*mukhaddimun*) who were corrupt, "very dangerous," and interested solely in profit.<sup>73</sup> Housewives should instead conduct in-depth interviews with servants before hiring them and should clarify issues like the maid's duties, her uniform, and her schedule, including time off.<sup>74</sup> To avoid future conflict, the housewife must not "make promises that she cannot stand by" or give the maid the impression that the work is easier than it really is.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the housewife should not "tire the maid's mind" with an immediate list of tasks, and she should be patient as the maid learns "her mistress's desires."<sup>76</sup> If the maid made a mistake, the mistress should "indicate it immediately" and without anger. Staying composed in front of one's maid was a crucial part of the housewife's own emotional labor.<sup>77</sup> Housewives were encouraged to change the "tone and language" they used when addressing servants, since "most of [the servants] listen to radio broadcasts daily," where they heard about "the worker in Europe and the rights that he enjoys."<sup>78</sup>

But the enlightened housewife was to do more than curb possible sources of discontent and even rebellion; she also was tasked with raising a maid's self-esteem and "gradually train[ing] her to respect herself." For this, housewives would first need to respect their maids. Sa'id urged readers to raise the maid's standard of living and give her rest, a proper place for sleep, and a private closet.<sup>79</sup> As an article in *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* directed: "Make your house one that they like to stay in, not a jail that they want to leave."<sup>80</sup> Housewives should speak to their maids with kindness and humanity, allowing them to retain their "personal honor" (*karama shakhsiyya*), and in turn make them better workers:<sup>81</sup> "Just as we expect from them politeness and respect toward us, we must treat them the same."<sup>82</sup> The reformers even invoked the rhetoric of family, encouraging housewives to look after the safety of their maids, "just as she [the mistress] looks after the safety of herself and of her kids."<sup>83</sup>

Such calls for respect and even familial treatment were not calls for equality: the ultimate goal was to retain loyalty and control over one's maid, who was central to the housewife's personal standing and national success. Indeed, despite the rhetoric of shared humanity, the reformers assumed that there were fundamental differences between elite housewives and their peasant maids. For example, *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* advised that if a maid became ill, the housewife should not take her to the hospital

<sup>70</sup>*Al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 4 (1925): 165.

<sup>71</sup>*Filastin*, 16 March 1941, 1–2.

<sup>72</sup>*Al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 8 (1925): 345.

<sup>73</sup>Brokerage houses, the article stated, had become centers for "traders of the white slave"; *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 7 (1925): 293–94.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.* It was advised that the uniforms of servants be "simple and clean"; *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 2, no. 4 (1922): 118.

<sup>75</sup>The housewife could ask about the maid's family, her health, and where she had worked previously; *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 7 (1925): 293–94. On the specific duties of servants, see *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 9 (1925): 379–80.

<sup>76</sup>*Al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 8 (1925): 345.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup>*Filastin*, 16 March 1941, 1–2. Housewives were advised to remember their maids' humanity, always use polite language, and give small rewards for jobs well done. See *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 8 (1925): 345.

<sup>79</sup>*Filastin*, 16 March 1941, 1–2.

<sup>80</sup>*Al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 2, no. 4 (1922): 118.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup>*Al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 8 (1925): 345.

<sup>83</sup>*Al-Mar'a al-Jadida* 5, no. 4 (1925): 165.

(where the housewife would presumably go), which was “detested” by the maid (*makruh ‘indaha*). Rather, the housewife should take care of the maid at home.<sup>84</sup>

Of course, not all middle-class women had full-time servants. As *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* acknowledged, some housewives had maids who came once a week or for a few hours per day. If this was the case, the housewives would have to take on most of the housework. But living without a maid had its advantages, too: with no maid to look after, the housewife could save money, preserve total freedom in her home, and leave her house without worrying about her maid’s activities in her absence.<sup>85</sup> She was free from the intellectual and emotional labor of housewives who managed maids.

Many reformers compared the status of maids in Arab countries with that of maids in Europe and the United States. It was “undeniable,” Sa’id claimed, that “Westerners” succeeded in elevating maids’ positions. She cited the higher salaries that maids received in the West and the growth of American schools dedicated to the “art” of domestic service.<sup>86</sup> *Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* similarly compared Western “civilized countries” (*al-buldan al-mutamaddina*), where there are “special laws and systems regarding servants” to “our countries,” which are “still deprived of that,” perhaps explaining the current “chaos that we see.”<sup>87</sup> As part of this Western-looking position, *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* published an Arabic translation of an English article by the American minister and advice writer Frank Crane, who identified himself “as a neutral [male] observer” of the continuous quarreling between the mistress and maid.<sup>88</sup> Crane wrote that housewives should “not neglect the complaint of the maids, for [the maids] resent the mistress’s unfriendliness, her rudeness, her disdain, and her scorn” regarding the maid’s work.<sup>89</sup> Like Sa’id and other Arab reformers, Crane called for respectful treatment: “Do not consider her an iron machine and do not expect her to do what she is not able.”<sup>90</sup> He encouraged housewives not to view housework with “disdain and degradation” but to take part in it.<sup>91</sup> In particular Crane, like the Arab reformers, advised housewives to give maids their freedom. Housewives should refrain from “meddling” in their maids’ affairs, for “every person prefers and desires to work independently without a hand extended over them.” The maid, like her mistress, is “not free from the spirit of freedom that crawls in all of our veins.”<sup>92</sup>

Granting maids their freedom would simultaneously maintain a clear boundary between Arab housewives and their domestic workers.<sup>93</sup> Crane advised: “Don’t inquire much from your employee about her personal problems and private things, for becoming too close and acquainted with each other” would result in “losing your status” and “there will no longer be anything that distinguishes . . . you from her.”<sup>94</sup> Another article in *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* similarly urged housewives to “make [servants] strangers from your family affairs” and “beware of talking about quarrels in front of them,” for that would “lower your position in their eyes.”<sup>95</sup> As Seikaly notes, even as the domesticity discourse advocated social reform in the home, the home became “a site for the fortification of social hierarchies.”<sup>96</sup> Using the rhetoric of “us versus them,” the domestic reformers emphasized that the status of being a “new” Arab woman was reserved for the mistress alone.

<sup>84</sup>*Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 2, no. 4 (1922): 118.

<sup>85</sup>*Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 5, no. 10 (1925): 431–32.

<sup>86</sup>*Filastin*, 9 March 1941, 1, 3. Sa’id was, according to Seikaly (*Men of Capital*, 62), “a relentless Anglophile” who praised English conduct and taste. Scholars have noted the influence of European and American domestic ideals on Arab middle-class ideals. See, for example, Khater, *Inventing Home*, and Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, ch. 2.

<sup>87</sup>*Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 5, no. 4 (1925): 165.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.* Frank Crane was an American Presbyterian minister who published articles on life advice, ethics, and women’s roles. See, for example, *Four Minute Essays* (New York: Wm. H. Wise, 1919). On the topic of the translation and introduction of Western domestic reform literature into other languages and cultures, see Elizabeth LaCouture, “Translating Domesticity in Chinese History and Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 124, no. 4 (2019): 1278–89.

<sup>89</sup>*Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 5, no. 4 (1925): 165.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.* Similar points are made in *Filastin*, 23 March 1941, 2; and *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 5, no. 5 (1925): 211.

<sup>92</sup>*Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 5, no. 4 (1925): 165.

<sup>93</sup>The emphasis on maintaining this boundary was perhaps heightened by the fact that many in the new middle class had not had a family history of servant keeping. See Todd, “Domestic Service,” 193.

<sup>94</sup>*Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 5, no. 4 (1925): 165.

<sup>95</sup>*Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* 2, no. 4 (1922): 118.

<sup>96</sup>Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 55.

Not all Arab periodicals celebrated the Western model of housekeeping. Some urged readers not to imitate modern European women. For example, an article in the Palestinian monthly journal *al-Akhlaq* (Morals) criticized the way wealthy, modern post-World War I French women spent their time. According to the article, the French “new woman,” after waking and drinking her tea with milk, has her hair and nails done and gets a massage. She has lunch out rather than eating at home; after that she goes shopping for clothing or jewelry. When she finally arrives home in the afternoon, she gives orders to her servants, then gets dressed for a long night of dancing. The article asks: “Where in all of this is household management, concern for her husband, taking care of her children, and supervising her servants? . . . We don’t think that the presence of this type of wealthy women is desirable for the benefit of the family or for the benefit of the country.”<sup>97</sup> This public discourse on domestic reform, as Omnia El Shakry has argued, must be understood with respect to both colonial and anti-colonial/nationalist discussions of modernity.<sup>98</sup> Whereas Dimashqiyya and Sa’id encouraged readers to imitate some of the lifestyles and domestic reform initiatives of European colonizers, other writers, like the one in *al-Akhlaq*, rejected the European “new woman” model as one consumed with luxury and frivolity, akin to unreformed upper-class Arab women.

Fiction writers also voiced social critiques of mistress-maid relations in the Arab world. In his first novel, *Surakh fi Layl Tawil* (Cry in a Long Night; written in 1946 and published in 1955), the Palestinian novelist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra comments on relations among the old notable class in Palestine (“a perishing aristocracy”), those from modest backgrounds who become newly wealthy, and the peasants.<sup>99</sup> Like the domestic reformers, Jabra criticizes the old aristocratic classes for their exploitation of maids. Jabra’s autobiographical main character, Amin, who has grown up in a poor village but joined the ranks of the middle class after becoming a successful writer, is hired by an aristocratic Palestinian Arab woman to write the history of her family. While sifting through the family’s papers, Amin laughs at the hypocrisy of this aristocratic class, whose men “flaunted their silken clothes and feathered turbans before the eyes of the rabble in their times, only to withdraw to their homes to try to seduce one of the village girls in their domestic service.”<sup>100</sup> Amin also criticizes the wealthy Arab women of his own time, who he believes suffer from an excess of unproductive leisure time. In one conversation, Amin’s friend ‘Umar remarks that wealthy Arab women have vast leisure time because “the servants take care of all of the cooking and cleaning.” For ‘Umar, “leisure is the enemy of God. It’s an appendage of riches and progress. . . . Much of what fills [the Arab woman’s] life—makeup, color magazines—is nothing but a symbol for sex.”<sup>101</sup> Unlike Salwa Sa’id, Jabra’s characters ‘Umar and Amin do not view the presence of maids in modern Arab households as facilitating women’s social commitments and national progress. Nor does Amin see becoming a “new woman” as a laudable pursuit for Arab women; rather, he sees that category as a superficial obsession of elite women. One of the aristocratic women in the novel, Roxane, wildly burns all of her family’s old papers in pursuit of becoming “a new woman”—an act that Amin (and Jabra, it seems) finds “absolutely repugnant.”<sup>102</sup>

### Maid in Retrospect: Palestinian Memoirs

To what extent did Arab housewives in Palestine follow domestic reformers’ advice on mistress-maid relations? And how did maids themselves shape the household? Turning to memoirs and autobiographies

<sup>97</sup>“Al-Mar’a al-Jadida,” *al-Akhlaq*, 1 February 1933, 40–43. There is a flawed assumption, as Sibylle Meyer notes, that European middle-class women left all of the domestic work to maids and servants. So too was the case with Arab middle-class women. In reality, as Meyer writes, “keeping up bourgeois appearances forced the invisibility of housework. Making this work invisible became in itself work.” See “The Tiresome Work of Conspicuous Leisure: On the Domestic Duties of the Wives of Civil Servants in the German Empire (1871–1918),” in *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present*, ed. Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987), 164.

<sup>98</sup>Omnia El Shakry, “Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt,” in Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, 126–70.

<sup>99</sup>Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *Surakh fi Layl Tawil* (Baghdad: Matba’at al-‘Ani, 1955), 26. The translations used here are found in William Tamplin, trans., *Cry in a Long Night* (forthcoming).

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 11–12.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>102</sup>Roxane also seeks to become a “new woman” by marrying Amin. The phrase “new woman” is used in the text. Ibid., 85–86.

written by upper- and middle-class Palestinians reveals how domestic reform discourse was translated into daily life. The domestic servants who make frequent appearances in memoirs are seldom fully formed figures. Nevertheless, the memoirs do convey “a semblance of reality” in their representations of mistress-maid relationships.<sup>103</sup> This section analyzes Palestinian autobiographies and memoirs that recall the authors’ urban childhoods, which were crucially shaped by domestic workers in their homes. In contrast to the prescriptive domestic reform texts that encouraged Arab housewives to establish a respectful but clear mistress-maid boundary, the Palestinian memoirs often blur these boundaries. The memoirists detail the intimate, daily, and affective relations that developed between elite families (particularly children) and domestic workers. As with middle-class memoirs from colonial Bengal, the Palestinian memoirists often “sanitize the highly stratified, hierarchical relationship between employers and servants in real life” through an emphasis on familial love and sharing.<sup>104</sup> By doing so, authors may seek to project a corrected view of the elite classes and of their own families’ role in hierarchical class relations, while also promoting a narrative of Palestinian national solidarity. At the same time, a careful reading of the memoirs reveals that middle- and upper-class housewives maintained a clear distinction from their maid counterparts through clothing, spatial boundaries, and hierarchical tasks within the household.

My analysis of Palestinian memoirs follows the methodology of Stoler and Strassler, who emphasize the need to study both *what* is remembered and *how* it is remembered. Memoirs may be understood as “interpretive labor”; they are neither merely “constructions of the present” nor “privileged access to a real past.”<sup>105</sup> Historians of Palestine have used memoirs both as primary sources and as a way of interrogating Palestinian memory.<sup>106</sup> Terri DeYoung suggests that the abundance of recently published Palestinian memoirs may be understood as an attempt to counter the spatial loss of Palestine through memory. Thus Palestinian memoirs are both testimonials to the past and present experiences of Palestinians as well as memories of a “past that no longer exists.”<sup>107</sup> The memoirs of Palestinian elites analyzed here detail the experiences of a generation of educated, middle- and upper-class Palestinians whose relatively stable lives under British Mandate rule suddenly transformed into stateless existences in 1948, when over 700,000 Arabs were exiled from Palestine.<sup>108</sup> As Rashid Khalidi points out, the *Nakba* was in fact a “great leveller, and a source of a universally shared experience” among Palestinians, which may help explain the retrospective constructions of the home as a site of national solidarity that supersedes class differences.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, the “coming-of-age” experience in these memoirs often overlaps with the *Nakba* and the loss of land and security for the family of the memoirist. Childhood accounts, which are often “driven by a desire to explain the present self,” commonly contain nostalgia for the comforts of the childhood home—including the “warmth” of servants and nannies. The nostalgia for maids that we see in elite Palestinian memoirs, however, is further compounded by the greater sense of national longing for security, place, and all that was taken in 1948.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>103</sup>Banerjee, “Down Memory Lane,” 688.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 694. See also Swapna Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>105</sup>Stoler and Strassler, “Castings for the Colonial,” 9.

<sup>106</sup>For a historian who uses memoirs as primary sources, see Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). For an example of works that interrogate Palestinian memory, see Susan Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestine Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). On the interrogation of Palestinian memory and the home, see Falestin Naili, “Memories of Home and Stories of Displacement: The Women of Artas and the ‘Peasant Past,’” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, no. 4 (2009): 63–74; and Dima Saad, “Materializing Palestinian Memory: Objects of Home and the Everyday Eternities of Exile,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 80 (2019): 57–71.

<sup>107</sup>Terri DeYoung, “The Disguises of the Mind: Recent Palestinian Memoirs,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 51, no.1 (2017): 5–21, quote on 7.

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>109</sup>Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 194.

<sup>110</sup>Jane Hamlett, “The Dining Room Should Be the Man’s Paradise, as the Drawing Room Is the Woman’s: Gender and Middle-Class Domestic Space in England, 1850–1910,” *Gender and History* 21, no. 3 (2009): 576–91, quote on 580. As Falestin Naili writes regarding Palestinian female refugees from the village of Artas now living in eastern Amman, “Physical displacement . . . tends to hide temporal displacement, and often what is longed for is not only the homeland but also the time of one’s childhood and youth”: “Memories of Home and Stories of Displacement,” 72.

Hala Sakakini (1924–2003) describes a quintessential Jerusalem bourgeois childhood in her memoir *Jerusalem and I* (1987). Hala's father Khalil Sakakini was a well-known Palestinian author and educator.<sup>111</sup> In May 1937, the Sakakinis moved into their newly built home in Qatamon, an upper-middle-class neighborhood in western Jerusalem. The neighbors of the Sakakini family were predominantly Palestinian Christian families like their own, but also Muslims (like the Karmi family), British officials, and middle-class Jews. Hala recalls that moving into the Qatamon house was “a dream come true” for her mother Sultana, who had planned in advance how to arrange each room's furniture so that on the family's arrival, “the house was tidy and everything was in its place in no time.”<sup>112</sup> In preparing her new home, Sultana was likely thinking about how to exhibit good “taste” (*dhawq*), which had become a form of cultural capital and was considered among a middle-class woman's “first duties.”<sup>113</sup>

Sultana did not tend to all of this housework alone. She relied on the help of female relatives as well as domestic workers. In 1930, the Sakakinis hired a Jewish maid, Regina, who lived in the Montefiore neighborhood in Jerusalem. When Regina brought her son to work one day, Hala and her sister played with him. As Regina and her son were leaving, Sultana insisted that her daughters give the boy an old tricycle, which he was, “of course, overjoyed to receive.”<sup>114</sup> Hala Sakakini does not comment further on Regina's Jewish identity, nor on whether it was common practice for Palestinian Arab families to hire Jewish domestic workers at the time. Although certainly there were cases of Palestinian Arab families hiring Jewish maids, as well as Jewish families hiring Palestinian Arab domestic workers, this practice became less common in the late 1930s and 1940s as communal violence increased.<sup>115</sup>

In a later house, the Sakakinis employed another “young maid” whom Hala does not mention by name. On one occasion this maid was in “a mischievous mood,” as Hala recalls: in anticipation of Hala's brother's return from university in the United States, Hala's female relatives “spent the morning in the kitchen busily preparing all kinds of delicious dishes.” The young maid would “every now and then . . . rush into the kitchen” and falsely announce the brother's arrival; “the ladies would let out a joyous cry” and rush to the verandah, only to discover that the maid was playing a prank on them.<sup>116</sup> This memory reveals only a small fragment of the anonymous maid's life, but it nevertheless indicates the playfulness and even defiance that some domestic workers exhibited at their places of work. Hala Sakakini recalls another memory of a former servant in their home in the 1930s that similarly defies the rigid descriptions of mistress-maid relations that we saw in the prescriptive literature:

I shall never forget a familiar scene in those years: Mother sitting on the wide divan in our kitchen-dining-room wearing her glasses and darning stockings. Next to her would be sitting an ugly, middle-aged man who looked weary and drab. This was Abed who as a young man had been a servant in our house. Now he was a cook working for an English family. Abed always had a great many things to complain about: his health was not as it should have been, he had flat feet and they were giving him trouble, his employers were not treating him well, he was looking for a wife but could not find one.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>111</sup>On Khalil Sakakini, see Nadim Bawalsa, “Sakakini Defrocked,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 42 (2010): 5–25.

<sup>112</sup>Sakakini, *Jerusalem and I*, 61.

<sup>113</sup>Abou-Hodeib, “Taste and Class,” 477. See also Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, “The Material Life of the Ottoman Middle Class,” *History Compass* 10, no. 8 (2012): 584–95.

<sup>114</sup>Sakakini, *Jerusalem and I*, 9.

<sup>115</sup>Some Jews saw hiring Palestinian Arab domestic workers as a potential mode of Jewish-Arab cooperation. Gerda Arlosoroff-Goldberg wrote that Arab maids in Jewish homes would “broaden the horizons” of Arab maids and in turn, if the Arab maids learned European manners, more understanding could be established between “one woman and another”; “Comments to the ‘Palestinian’ Women's Movement,” *Ha-Isha* 2 (1929), cited in Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 216. In other cases, however, Zionist labor organizations heavily policed the presence of Palestinian Arab domestic workers in Jewish homes, as one letter to the editor in the Hebrew newspaper *Davar* highlights. The writer, a Jewish woman who employed two Arab domestic workers in her home, condemned the audacity of two Jewish women from the Zionist Council of Women Workers (*moetzet ha-poelot*) who came to her house accusing her of, and scolding her for, hiring Arab maids. The women's aim was to “protect” the Hebrew economy (*Davar*, 14 September 1936). On Jewish domestic workers in Palestine, see Deborah S. Bernstein, *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 235–56.

<sup>116</sup>Sakakini, *Jerusalem and I*, 61.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

The relationship between Sultana and ‘Abed indicates not only the collapse of prescribed employee-employer boundaries but also the blurring of assumed gendered boundaries within the home. Perhaps women like Sultana, who themselves came from lower-class backgrounds, more commonly socialized with individuals from lower classes and former employees.<sup>118</sup>

Salwa Salem, who grew up in a prosperous family in Jaffa in the 1940s, also invoked the language of friendship and family in her discussion of childhood servants in her memoir *The Wind in My Hair*.<sup>119</sup> In a brief chapter on her pre-1948 memories entitled “Beloved Roots,” Salem describes her “beautiful” childhood home.<sup>120</sup> She recalls that a young twenty-two-year-old girl named Fatima would come to her house to help her mother with domestic chores.<sup>121</sup> Fatima was thin, “timid, calm, and attractive” and from a Shiite family. According to Salem, Fatima was working to help her parents support a big family, “which was why, at age 22, she was not yet married.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, Fatima’s work may have been her family’s main source of income. Fatima’s day was long: she would arrive at Salem’s house every morning and stay until after dinner. Salem recalls that Fatima was “an important presence in our family,” and as children Salwa and her siblings could “count on her complicity in everything that we were not able to ask of our mother.” Fatima was particularly affectionate toward Salwa Salem’s younger brother, Ihsan. Salem writes: “It was good to have [Fatima] around and we looked on her as one of the family.”<sup>123</sup> Did Fatima also regard her employers as family? Or did she view the Salem family with indifference, or something else? Only Salem’s memory of Fatima, which nostalgically celebrates pre-1948 Palestine as a “wonderful time of prosperity,” appears to survive in writing.<sup>124</sup>

Fatima al-Basha, a domestic worker in Ghada Karmi’s childhood household, likewise made a lasting impression on the Karmi children. Karmi (b. 1939) details her memories of Fatima with nationally inflected yet highly self-aware nostalgia in her memoir, *In Search of Fatima*. Although it was common for “better-off” Palestinians living in Qatamon to employ peasants in their homes, Karmi writes that having a maid was new for her mother, Umm Ziyad, for whom servants would have been “an unthinkable luxury” when she was growing up. Now, thanks to her husband’s career, Umm Ziyad enjoyed “the advantages of her status”;<sup>125</sup> she could hire a maid, pursue social activities, and join the ranks of the Palestinian middle class.

Initially, Fatima worked twice a week in the Karmi household. When the Karmis moved into their Qatamon house in the late 1930s, Fatima began to work there daily.<sup>126</sup> When Fatima was in her early teenage years, she was “married off” to a man “who treated her badly” and from whom she “escaped” back to her parents’ house when she got the chance. The details of the story remained vague to Ghada as a child: “She had two daughters by [her husband] and at some point he had either died or abandoned her, we never knew.”<sup>127</sup> Perhaps Fatima intentionally decided to keep her intimate relationships private from the Karmi family, thereby maintaining a boundary with her employers. By the time Fatima came to work at the Karmi household, she was about forty years old and lived with her two children in the village of al-Maliha, about three miles southwest of Jerusalem.<sup>128</sup> Fatima would walk each day from her house to Qatamon. Fatima’s brother Muhammad also occasionally worked in the Karmi household. As Ghada writes, her father helped Muhammad get a job at the ‘Umariyya School that Ghada’s

<sup>118</sup>I am grateful to the *IJMES* anonymous reviewer for making this point.

<sup>119</sup>Salwa Salem (with Laura Maritano), *The Wind in My Hair*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2007).

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>121</sup>The English translation of *The Wind in My Hair* spells this name as “Fatma.” It is interesting to note that many of the maids mentioned in these memoirs were named “Fatma” or “Fatima.” In the North African colonial context, “Fatma” became a derogatory, generic name used by French colonists for Arab maids. There is no clear indication, however, that the authors cited in this article are using pseudonyms or that the real names of the domestic workers were anything other than the names provided by the authors. See Zahia Smail Salhi, “Algerian Women as Agents of Change and Social Cohesion,” in *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Agents of Change*, ed. Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 151.

<sup>122</sup>Salem, *Wind in My Hair*, 11.

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup>Karmi, *In Search of Fatima*, 15.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>127</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*

brother Ziyad attended. Muhammad would then “tend our garden and do odd jobs” in the Karmi household. Fatima also had an older brother who had emigrated to South America to join the growing community of Syrians and Palestinians there. Karmi describes Fatima’s facial features but admits that she could no longer fully picture her physical appearance: “It was more the sense of her I retain, a kindly patient motherliness.”<sup>129</sup>

Like Salwa Salem, Karmi remembers Fatima with longing, care, and familial affection. As a child, Ghada was very attached to Fatima: “From the start, I adopted Fatima for my mother.”<sup>130</sup> Although she knew Fatima had two daughters of her own, Ghada “saw her as being exclusively mine.”<sup>131</sup> When Fatima stayed with the Karmi children for seven days while their parents were away at a funeral, it was “wonderful,” according to Ghada’s sister Siham, “because we could do whatever we liked and we loved Fatima.”<sup>132</sup> As we have seen in other memoirs, it is nearly impossible to untangle Ghada Karmi’s childhood longing from her national longing for Palestine. After 1948, she writes, “the precious memory” of Fatima “would merge with the rest of my irrecoverable childhood.”<sup>133</sup>

Umm Ziyad did not view Fatima with the same affection. For her, Fatima “was merely a hard-working village woman who cleaned our house and helped . . . with the cooking.”<sup>134</sup> Umm Ziyad spent much less time with Fatima than her children did. Indeed, Fatima’s presence facilitated Umm Ziyad’s social life, her “principal pastime,” which included daily visits with friends in Qatamon. Karmi writes that she hardly remembers her mother from the time period after the family moved to Qatamon, “I think because she went out so much.”<sup>135</sup>

To be sure, Fatima’s presence did not excuse Umm Ziyad from all household tasks. On the contrary, domestic workers supplemented, rather than replaced, Arab housewives’ work. Despite the critique that elite women had too much leisure time, in reality most contributed physical labor in the household. Umm Ziyad kept a “rigidly enforced” daily household routine. In the mornings, she was responsible for the cooking. Fatima helped by preparing the food—washing meat, crushing garlic, peeling vegetables, straining rice—so that by the time Umm Ziyad entered the kitchen in the morning, she could put the ingredients together “in her uniquely magical way.”<sup>136</sup> Within this shared division of labor, there was a clear hierarchy of tasks. Once Umm Ziyad finished cooking, Fatima would clean up while the mistress of the house left to have coffee with friends. Fatima would then set the table for lunch, ready for Umm Ziyad’s return. On days when Fatima was not at their house, Ghada’s sister Siham was responsible for washing the floor.<sup>137</sup> The Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan, who was born in 1917 to a wealthy, semi-aristocratic Nablus family, similarly recalls that “even though there was always a servant woman in the house . . . [m]ost of the burden of the considerable housework fell upon Mother’s shoulders” due to their large house and frequent guests.<sup>138</sup>

Even as mistresses and maids worked alongside one another, boundaries in the home were demarcated in several ways. First, clothing established the crucial difference between the middle-class housewife and the domestic servant. Ghada Karmi recalls that peasant women like Fatima generally wore an embroidered *thawb*, which, for Ghada’s mother Umm Ziyad, was “a badge of her peasant identity” and “as much a part of her as the colour of her eyes.” It was “unthinkable” for non-peasant women to wear such a garment, “however beautifully embroidered.”<sup>139</sup> By contrast, middle-class women like Umm Ziyad preferred Europe’s latest fashions: a 1948 photograph shows Umm Ziyad in a two-tone dress with large shoulder pads; she also sports permed hair, dark lipstick, and thin eyebrows. Yet the irony, as Karmi notes, was that following 1948 the “despised peasant costume would become a symbol of

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., 53, 56.

<sup>138</sup>Fadwa Tuqan, *A Mountainous Journey: An Autobiography*, trans. Olive Kenny (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1990), 64.

<sup>139</sup>Karmi, *In Search of Fatima*, 23.

the homeland, worn with pride by the very same women who had previously spurned it.”<sup>140</sup> Spatial boundaries within the home also marked the difference between employees and employers. Karmi recalls that Fatima, after laying out lunch in the dining room for the Karmi family, would “retire to the kitchen to eat her own lunch.” Ghada would always eat with Fatima in the kitchen rather than with her family in the dining room, wanting to feel that she had a “special bond” with Fatima.<sup>141</sup>

Domestic workers, in turn, hosted these elite and middle-class children in their own homes and exposed them to village customs and food.<sup>142</sup> In this way, female domestic workers served as a crucial connection between Palestinian peasant life and elite urban households. Karmi recalls that “we loved going to [Fatima’s] house” in her village al-Maliha, although Umm Ziyad would protest, “God knows why.” Fatima’s house comprised one room “where everyone ate, sat, slept, and conducted their business.” The children would eat “all the staples of Palestinian peasant food” like dishes of olive oil and ground thyme, crushed green olives and fresh sweet onions. Fatima would cook vegetable stews, “since meat for her and the other villagers was a rare luxury.” Fatima also would bake “round loaves of peasant bread,” which the children ate “as if they were the most delicious foods we had ever tasted.” Following the meal, Ghada would go with Fatima’s daughters to the freshwater spring outside al-Maliha, where they would fill up jugs of water and carry them back on their heads, “gracefully keeping their balance.”<sup>143</sup> In a later memoir in which Karmi chronicled her return to Palestine and search for Fatima in 2005, she reflected that, although Fatima’s family was poor, “in my memory it could not have been richer.”<sup>144</sup> Fatima al-Basha, for her part, may have been eager to share parts of village life with the Karmi children; at the same time, hosting them in her home likely required additional physical and emotional labor for Fatima, beyond her work in their household.

Ghada Karmi’s affection for Fatima and her romanticization of peasant life did not entirely blur her understanding of class hierarchies, even as a child. Ghada’s siblings Siham and Ziyad, recognizing Ghada’s love for Fatima, would tease Ghada about being a peasant child: “You’re not our sister at all,” they would tell her. “We found you in the garden. Your real parents are peasants from Fatima’s village.” Karmi remembers that she would become upset, for even at a young age she did not like being associated with peasants: “I had already absorbed the prevailing social distinctions between the three major sectors of Palestinian society at the time: the peasants, the rural landowning families, and the townsfolk, with the peasants at the bottom of the heap.”<sup>145</sup> Indeed, condescension toward peasants was part of her family’s everyday conversation.<sup>146</sup> Karmi’s father would refer to people with “peasant origins” as having “jumped” classes. He would say: “So-and-so may call himself a university lecturer, but mark my words, the man is a peasant.” On the one hand, this comment points to the social mobility of peasants through education and to the constant reformulation of the middle class in mandatory Palestine. On the other hand, it highlights the prevailing belief that individuals belonged to “true,” rigid social classes that education could not entirely overcome. Karmi’s father even claimed he could tell who was a peasant by looking at the shape of his trousers. In response to this, Umm Ziyad would retort, “As if your family were any better than peasants themselves!”<sup>147</sup>

<sup>140</sup>Ibid., 23–24. On the significance of clothing, and specifically the *thawb*, for post-1948 Palestinian identity, see, for instance, Tina Sherwell, “Palestinian Costume, the Intifada and the Gendering of Nationalist Discourse,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 5, no. 3 (1996): 293–303; and Faida N. Abu-Ghazaleh, *Ethnic Identity of Palestinian Immigrants in the United States: The Role of Cultural Material Artifacts* (El Paso, TX: LFB Scholarly), 2011.

<sup>141</sup>Karmi, *In Search of Fatima*, 24–25. The spatial boundary may have also been a result of the different eating customs of urbanites and villagers. I thank the *IJMES* anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

<sup>142</sup>Domestic workers who lived in urban areas also exposed elite urban children to the lower-class urban neighborhoods.

<sup>143</sup>Karmi, *In Search of Fatima*, 17.

<sup>144</sup>Ghada Karmi, *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (London: Verso, 2015), 262. The last time Ghada saw Fatima was in 1948, when the Karmi family left Jerusalem for Damascus. Fatima and her brother Muhammad stayed behind, and Fatima looked after the Karmis’ house in Qatamon in anticipation of the Karmis’ return following the war. The Karmis did not return, nor did they hear any news about Fatima’s fate in the war and its aftermath. As an adult, in 2005, Ghada Karmi returned to what had become Israel and the West Bank in search of more information about Fatima. She eventually found Fatima’s nephew, who told her that Fatima and her daughters fled from al-Maliha to Bethlehem in the summer of 1948 (262–72).

<sup>145</sup>Karmi, *In Search of Fatima*, 18.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>147</sup>According to Ghada’s father, if a man wore round trousers it meant he had peasant origins, for when peasants traded their traditional loose trousers for urban clothes, they did not learn how to correctly iron their pants; *ibid.*



Like Fatima al-Basha, Na‘ameh, a Muslim Arab widow from Bayt Safafa who worked in John Melkon Rose’s childhood home, influenced the Rose family’s domestic setting and became, as Rose recalls, “part of the family.” Rose (1924–95) was the son of an Armenian mother and British father living in Jerusalem’s Greek Colony. He describes Na‘ameh as a “devout Muslim” who was given privacy to pray daily in the family’s sitting room.<sup>148</sup> Na‘ameh influenced John’s upbringing through her mode of discipline: “When very small I would run after [Na‘ameh] and try to pull the veil off her head. One day to deter me she told me about heaven and hell—of which I had not heard before; she warned me that naughty boys would be burned in a huge fire.” Na‘ameh’s words succeeded in disciplining the young John: “I believed her, was terrified and from then on stopped teasing her.”<sup>149</sup> Na‘ameh also exposed Rose to her own way of life when, after she retired, Rose visited Na‘ameh and her son ‘Issa in the outskirts of Bayt Safafa.

Jacob Nammar, born in 1941 to a notable Jerusalem family, recalls in his memoir *Born in Jerusalem, Born Palestinian* how a Palestinian peasant woman, also named Fatima, shaped his views on peasant life and urban-rural connections. Jacob’s sister Fahima, he writes, would stop at a produce market in Jerusalem on the way to school each morning, where she became “good friends” with a peasant named Fatima ‘Alayan. Each morning, Fatima would travel from her village of Battir, southwest of Jerusalem, to the city center and sell her produce. In light of Fahima’s new friendship, Jacob’s mother invited Fatima to their house and gave her hand-me-down clothes. In return, Fatima provided the Nammar family with fresh fruit and vegetables.<sup>150</sup> On Saturdays, Fatima also would help Jacob’s mother wash the “huge pile of our clothes” and bed sheets.<sup>151</sup>

Nammar refers to Fatima affectively as a friend, not a worker in their home. Indeed, there is no indication that there was any monetary exchange between Nammar’s family and Fatima. Instead, Nammar writes: “our families became good friends and found common interests.”<sup>152</sup> Like Karmi, Nammar nostalgically recalls visiting Fatima in Battir on holidays and summer vacations, which left a strong impression. His experiences “as a city boy interacting with this charming village” gave him “insight into the life and character of Palestinian peasant society.” Hospitality and generosity, he writes, “are two delightful characteristics” of Palestinian peasants. Although Battir did not have the “luxuries” that the Nammar family took for granted in the city, Palestinian villagers “lived in an abundance of food and produce.” Discussing how children in Battir took up the occupations of their parents, Nammar writes: “There was little thought that children might choose to move into other areas of work. They were satisfied with things that way.”<sup>153</sup> Nammar’s tone toward “simple” village life echoes that of post-1948 Palestinian nationalism, inflected with a populism that celebrates peasants as the symbol of rootedness and *sumud*, or steadfastness. Indeed, the experiences and published memoirs of elites like Jacob Nammar contribute to the nationalist celebration of Palestinian peasants for their authenticity which, as Ted Swedenburg notes, was viewed as uncorrupted by the penetration of European colonial consumerism and later Western-supported Israeli oppression. Likewise, the symbol of the Palestinian peasant rooted to the land acts as counterpoint to Israeli territorial claims to the land.<sup>154</sup>

Of course, domestic work was not merely an urban phenomenon. Salman Abu Sitta (b. 1937), from the village of al-Ma’in in the Beersheba District, describes the large number of domestic workers in his home, especially in the spring season when his mother was tasked with feeding the family as well as the shepherds and farmhands. As Abu Sitta recalls in his memoir *Mapping My Return* (2016), “Attached to our family for generations (nobody knows how many) were eight families of Africans, about thirty people in all. They were Muslims, spoke Arabic as we did, and their names were registered as ‘Abu Sitta.’” According to Salman Abu Sitta, in previous centuries the Africans had served as personal

<sup>148</sup>John H. Melkon Rose, *Armenians of Jerusalem: Memories of Life in Palestine* (London: Radcliffe Press, 1993), 101.

<sup>149</sup>Ibid.

<sup>150</sup>Jacob J. Nammar, *Born in Jerusalem, Born Palestinian: A Memoir* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2012), 36.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid.

<sup>153</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>154</sup>Swedenburg, “Palestinian Peasant,” 22–25. See also Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

guards for the heads of the family. He points out that the workers could seek other employment if they desired; they were not enslaved. These laborers did not receive regular wages, Abu Sitta recalls, “but they were given everything they needed, such as food, shelter, and clothing. When a young man or woman got married, my father covered all expenses. They were afforded full protection and the prestige of belonging to our family.”<sup>155</sup> Abu Sitta’s warm memories of these domestic workers, especially of a woman named Umm ‘Ali who would bathe him, resembles those of urban elite children.

Abu Sitta’s memoir also raises important questions about coercive domestic labor in Palestine. What did it mean for a domestic worker to receive no wage but be considered “part of the family”? How did economic shifts in mandatory Palestine affect such arrangements? To be sure, coercive domestic labor did exist under British Mandate rule. Although slavery was officially illegal, some poor, young women were nevertheless sold to work as maids. In January 1931, the Palestinian Arab politician Hasan Sadiq al-Dajani wrote a letter to the British High Commissioner of Palestine confirming this reality. The letter was published in the Palestinian newspaper *al-Hayat* (Life) under the headline, “They are selling their children to live.” Al-Dajani argued that the economic conditions in Palestine had led Arabs to sell their children into slavery. He related a recent personal experience: while traveling from Haifa to Jerusalem, al-Dajani’s driver picked up an Arab man and a young peasant girl, less than eight years old, who looked “desperate and distressed.” When al-Dajani asked the man about the girl, the man replied, “I hired her to send her to my brother in al-Bireh.” He continued, “I hired her for 25 years from her parents for 25 Palestinian pounds.” Others, the man said, even buy children for life. Another male passenger in the car confirmed that he also had bought a girl for himself and one for his cousin. When al-Dajani asked what the men did with the girls, the men replied: “We employ [the girls] and raise them so we don’t need maids.” This was “just like our forefathers would do in this area.” The men revealed that even many government workers, too, bought girls for the same purpose.<sup>156</sup>

British officials wavered over how to handle this evidence of slavery in Palestine. Government reports found that the girls being sold were “*abid*” girls, daughters of former black slaves of Bedouin tribes, who continued to be sold to wealthy families in Nablus and Jenin for periods ranging from seven to twenty-five years. The report found that about 150 such girls lived in the Nablus region, and another 150 were found elsewhere in Palestine. In the end, British officials decided not to harshly regulate this practice and instead focused on devising economic measures to improve the status of the “*abid*”.<sup>157</sup> Although domestic reformers explicitly warned against the selling of women into domestic servitude and encouraged elite women to develop new, reformed relationships to their maids, practices like the sale of girls to wealthy homes continued.

## Conclusion

Arab domestic workers in Palestine played crucial roles in Arab upper- and middle-class households and in Palestinian Arab memory. As domestic reformers wrote, to be a truly modern “new” Arab woman one had to change her relationship with her maid. Domestic workers themselves were also “new” in many ways. Palestinian peasants were undergoing major changes in the early 20th century due to the increase in wage labor, urban migration, interactions with non-Arabs, and access to education. Maids’ relationship to their own domestic labor also shifted with the increase in household technologies in wealthy homes. I have chosen here to call the Palestinian Arab domestic workers “new Arab maids” not because this was a

<sup>155</sup>Salman Abu Sitta, *Mapping My Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 6–7.

<sup>156</sup>*Al-Hayat*, 28 January 1931, 1. *Al-Hayat* ran a follow-up article on this topic, exploring and condemning the economic conditions that led to this status; 1 February 1931, 1.

<sup>157</sup>The government passed an ordinance in 1933 deeming any contract for the employment of girls for over one year unenforceable. See Assaf Likhovskiy, *Law and Identity in Mandate Palestine* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 85–105. The term “*abid*” literally means “slaves” in Arabic. The word is used in many Arabic dialects as a derogatory, insulting epithet for darker-skinned individuals of African descent (Eve M. Trout Powell, *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 3; John O. Hunwick and Eve Trout Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers: 2002), xix.

label used in the early 20th century but as a reminder that the domestic workers' positions were fundamentally intertwined with those of their mistresses, the "new Arab women." Elite and middle-class Arab women depended on maids not only for physical household labor but also for their own self-definition. Historians cannot fully understand the "new Arab woman"—or any "new woman" in the early 20th century, for that matter—without studying the domestic workers who facilitated this identity. Likewise, domestic workers' labor in elite households no doubt shaped their own understandings of Palestinian national identity and class formation. Those shifts, like the "new Arab woman" dynamics I have described, hold fertile questions for future research.

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