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**Energy behind Words, History behind Labels:
Poetry as Resistance in Suheir Hammad's *Born Palestinian, Born Black***

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Abstract: In her first collection of poems, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996), Suheir Hammad raises issues of race, class, and gender. In the poems like “may i take your order?”, “good work,” “brown bread hero,” etc. Hammad’s voice reverses the dominant and oppressive social hierarchy. Fusing her poems with a style like the hip-hop, Hammad draws attention to and criticise the lot of one of the world’s most marginalised people today, i.e. Palestinians. This paper focuses on Hammad’s use of poetry as a form of resistance—how Hammad explores the ‘history behind labels’; such as, how she uses the term ‘black’ not only as an ethnic marker but a political position in relation to a dominant power structure. It also attempts to explore the parallels between the experience of Palestinians and that of African-Americans using the technique of hip-hop.

Keywords: Palestinian, Black, marginalisation, resistance, labels, hip-hop.

In “may i take your order?,” a poem in Suheir Hammad’s first collection of poems, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (published in 1996), Hammad writes, “i’m the main dish/walking down the street/ my face a menu/ of first world delicacies” (1-4). Reducing a woman migrating from the so-called Third World not only to a commodity but to a food

delicacy is striking—not because its newness as an image of hierarchical position of women in society, but since it raises disturbing questions of race and class, gender and ethnicity. Suheir Hammad continues to describe the process of this de-humanisation in sharp phrases as she catalogues the ‘menu’—“olive skin almond eyes bitter tongue” (5). Using a first person narrative the persona of the poem describes how the woman as a delicacy is enjoyed by the First World (White) men,

men suck my titties in
eyes poppin out big business heads
licking their lips against
my thighs like i was some
cafe au lait ice cream (8-12)

The association of different delicacies popular in the United States of America and the different body parts of a woman is continued as Hammad gradually throws light on the capitalist nature of a society that makes real human beings nothing more than sellable objects highlighting the patriarchal mindset entangled with the capitalist mores of a society. Along with this, Hammad also brings the notion of the classic Orientalist notion of the exotic as she writes, “i must look spicy & exotic” (13)—on one hand, she throws light on the presentability of the objectified being; and, on the other hand, she shows a kind of essentialism which is socially attached to a woman from the Third World who migrates to America. In the first stanza she mentions ‘cafe au lait ice cream,’ and she associates her body parts, mainly the genitals, with ‘finger lickin good,’ alluding to a popular tag line of an advertisement of a food chain.¹ This association of the body and popular delicacies continues until she is asked about her origin, and she answers, “yeah there’s no hidini’m original recipe/ from the region of/ figs lentils & pomegranates” (33-35). From this point onwards we do

¹“Finger Licking Good,” as we know, is the tagline of very famous company Kentucky Fried Chicken, that sells various fast food products, chicken dish being its prime menu; it is interesting to note how a woman’s body part is equalized with the chicken delicacy suggesting the equality of flesh of the woman (human) and the flesh of the chicken (bird/ animal) bred for satisfying the human appetite.

not find the submissive tone and the suggestion of acceptance, but now the poet shows serious resistance against this commodification. The questions of the White man that she registers are unanswered as she mentions that even if the White race is successful in objectifying the Third World women and reducing them into mere food delicacies, yet it is impossible for them to go beyond; referring to male penetration during sexual intercourse, she says that the 'white boy' does not have means enough to enter her soul. This poem with its small length and precision, manages to capture the themes related to race and class, gender and ethnicity; with the binaries between the First World and the Third World, male and female. The poem presents conflicts on various levels, mainly on the basis of wealth and power. This essay analyses Hammad's use of the aforesaid themes and the conflicts in selected poems of *Born Palestinian, Born Black* to discuss what it achieves, i.e. the form of resistance. To briefly synthesise the argument – Hammad's raising of issues of race, class, gender and ethnicity of the marginalised has mainly two effects. First, she uses a cultural medium, namely, poetry for resistance, in which she uses those forms which have been used to express the grievances of the marginalised. In doing so Hammad creates a strong parallelism between content and form to criticise the system under which there is one of the world's most marginalised people today, i.e. Palestinians. Secondly, in these poems Hammad also sought to define 'blackness' anew. With various people from the Third World known not by their worth in anything but the skin colour, Hammad allows a free play of meanings of the word 'black'. She opens a new vista of fresh concepts depending on the situation and condition external as well as internal. Due to the limited scope of this paper it is not possible to go beyond the 'Palestinian' experience; hence, the discussion would confine on the parallel between the experience of the Palestinians and the Arab-Americans tangentially focusing on the African-American experience of the same kind that Hammad suggested in her poems.

Suheir Hammad is a Palestinian-American woman poet. It is interesting to note that she recognises herself as 'Black' as she describes and interprets the condition under exile. The main features of her poems in *Born Palestinian, Born Black* are the creative resistance

that comes through the form of poetry and a conscious deconstruction of hierarchies. Before we attempt an interpretation of her poetics of resistance, it would be necessary to discern the Arab-American ethos since the Arab-American literature is a genre that is still in its nascent state. Being an emergent field, an interpretation of this literature in the conventional way would not prove worthwhile as is reflected in the words of Lisa Suhair Majaj, another Palestinian-American poet and scholar:

As readers, we need to approach this literature [Arab-American] not with fixed expectations but in a spirit of open inquiry. As writers, our task is not only to claim and reshape the meanings of both "Arab" and "American," but also to explore an identity still in the process of being constructed—an identity which we are all, readers and writers alike, in the process of constructing. (Majaj 1999)

After the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, quite naturally as an offshoot of the historical phenomenon, Palestine suffered a lot of troubles related to borderlines of the country and occupation. Since 1967, occupation of the Palestinian territories has left a huge number of Palestinians homeless and many of them started migrating to lands foreign and hostile to them.² This has resulted in the hyphenated identities of the people known as Arab-Americans, or, in this case, Palestinian-Americans. The subject matter of the Arab-American literature is, therefore, replete with complex relationship with memory of the origins, cultural roots, and the reality in front of the eyes in the land of exile. We need to mention that in the land called America there exists certain zones with influences which are not distinctly 'American.'³ There are places, areas which have Chinese, Hispanic, Indian and other influences, and it can be marked geographically on the map of the United States. The social theoretician Renato Rosaldo, in his study *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, designates the places with Hispanic influences as 'border zones.' What he means,

²See Wikipedia for details.

³Here, by the term 'American,' we mean the dominant White culture.

however, is that these ‘zones’ are “sites of creative cultural production” and not “analytically empty transitional zones” (208). Hammad’s poetry is that ‘creative cultural production’ in which Hammad shows her deep and intimate knowledge of the coercion, conflict and resistance emanated from these ‘border zones of culture.’ As already mentioned, the complex relationship between memory and the new geography, the old social order of the origin, and the new social and communal tension are the subject matter of the Arab-American literature. What it needs in the first place is the proper way of expression. To Hammad, poetry is that mode of expression on a broad scale. The canonical discourse of poetry is the form that she chooses but she does not use the conventional way of expression. Negotiating between modernity and tradition in her poems, what Hammad achieves is a distinct way of representing the cultural identities that help the readers to understand the political consciousness of the exiled, and the issues of race, class, gender, and above all, the power-structure based on wealth and industry, and even on ethnic identity. Of her ethnic identity, in the poem “argela remembrance,” she writes, “we are a people/ stood on the edge of the sea/ . . ./ we read futures in search of our past” (9-17). Describing the distinct ways of a culture that is now shattered with various problems, Hammad firmly continues, “*we call ourselves the east*” (32, emphasis added). The personal and to some extent idiosyncratic angst of one woman reaches out to be the angst of one race, and of course Hammad then transcends even the racial boundaries to give a voice to the angst of the entire East—a kind of reshaping geography on the basis of a common thread, a common experience of oppression. The rearrangement of the traditional geographies is a tool that Hammad uses to accomplish a critique of the hierarchical situation—what she attempts is a complete deconstruction of the power relation in terms of race and ethnicity, gender and violence that she brutally unmasks. The frame of reference that Hammad chooses is of course the historical experience, not the geographical sites; and against a number of oppressive and cruel practices she altogether weaves a new map.

In the author’s “preface” of the 1996 edition of *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, Hammad quotes June Jordan (1936-2002), a Caribbean-American poet and activist:

*I was born a Black woman
and now
I am become a Palestinian
against the relentless laughter of evil
there is less and less living room
and where are my loved ones?*

*It is time to make our way home (11)*⁴

Taking the cue of the journey towards home from June Jordan's call, Hammad moves towards the cultural origin from where she is uprooted; she starts with a realisation that she puts like, "[h]ome is within me" (11). It is easy for us to understand that Hammad, like many of her fellow exiled people, shares an insider/outsider status in the new land, i.e. the American society. The multivocal articulations found in Hammad's writings come from this ethnic tension of a proper identity which is always in a flux. Suheir Hammad was born to a Palestinian refugee family and at a very early age she moved to America along with her family. However, this was a shift from one war-torn part of the world to another; only in the second case, it is a war on different ground. The racial, gendered, and class-related experiences that find voice in her poems creating a multivocal expression is a result of Hammad's systematic and carefully chosen deconstruction of the hierarchical strata that oppress the existence. Considering the dual role of language as power and politics, and words as both 'bullets and butterflies,' Hammad informs that her generation has been witness to "many changes involving technology, environment, and ideology" (11). However the main flow of humanity does not suffer any change and the fundamental activities remain the same—love or hatred, killing or dying, and "[p]eople sing, dance and write" (11). Behind her practice of writing as an art form, the main impulse, as she notes, is resistance—this is the force that prompts her to write as Hammad notes, "Why do I write? Cause I have to. *Cause my voice, in all its dialects, has been*

⁴June Jordan's poem is quoted from Hammad's "preface" to *Born Palestinian, Born Black*; hence the number in parenthesis refers to the page number of the "preface" and the italics are Hammad's. Quotes from the poems in *Born Palestinian, Born Black* are in line numbers, except the "preface" where it is the page number.

silenced too long. Cause women are still abused as naturally as breath. Peoples are still without land. Slavery exists, hunger persists and mothers cry (11, emphasis added). Albeit this is reason enough to voice her protest through her writings, there are still graver reasons. Knowing that she is going to touch many a discomfort zone of the society that otherwise looks perfect, Hammad challenges herself, and on a broader note, the entire human society, “[w]ith words, labels, and definitions” (12). It is in this context that she challenges the use of the word “Black” and registers the various meanings associated to the word:

- | | |
|-------|---|
| Black | like the coal diamonds are birthed from
like the dark matter of the universe
the Black September massacre of Palestinians
the Arabic expression “to blacken your face”
meaning to shame |
| Black | like opposite of white
the other
Indians in England, Africans in America,
Algerians in France and Palestinians in Israel
The shvartza labor of cleaning toilets and
picking garbage |
| Black | like the genius of Stevie, Zora and Abdel-Haleem
relative purity
like the face of God
the face of your grandmother (12) |

It is interesting to note that even these meanings are not final, as she allows the free play of meaning that expands from the materials like coal diamonds to the cosmos in the dark matter, from the imposed identity of the people in foreign lands to the literary geniuses joined with Black Liberation Movement. Allowing this free play, she advises to use the term ‘responsibly’ and ‘consciously,’ “Have respect for the energy behind words. The history behind labels. *Never let them be chosen for you. I decide what it means to be me, here and now*” (12, emphasis added). The social hegemony is broken as the linguistic monopoly is consciously reversed; words are for people, people are not

for words—Hammad changes the entire hierarchical position. Hence, one should understand the ‘energy behind words,’ and the ‘history behind labels,’ so that no passive labelling can take place. Hammad’s view is deconstructionist as she knows that there is no ‘final’ choice, it is again outside any strict rotundity. With the passage of time history would be richer and energy would flow into different direction bringing a sure change in the meaning(s) of the labels or words. As she notes, “We need to own our definitions and live by them. We need not be afraid to adapt or change them when necessary. Borders are manmade, and I refuse to respect them unless I have a say in their formation” (12-13). That is why the art she practises is the free-flowing poetry with a style best compared to the hip-hop techniques. Hip-hop, which is an urban youth culture in America associated with rap music, has always been a mode of voicing the angst of the African-Americans in a White-dominated American society.⁵ In this genre of music rhyming lyrics are chanted to a musical accompaniment; naturally when it is taken to be a form of protest, Hammad has made it her own. Without using any grammatical English and doing away all conventions of the ordinary syntactical language that the lexical and grammatical English would demand, Hammad breaks into the Western literary canon primarily in her use of the English language, but she uses it as a tool of resistance. The twenty-nine poems in *Born Palestinian, Born Black* have no ordinary punctuation marks—no commas, periods, question marks, or exclamation marks. They are replaced by occasional double and sometimes more than double spaces in the body of the poems, the examples of which can be found in the already quoted poems in our discussion. A natural consequence of this is the absolute absence of capitalization — Hammad completely dispenses with it. Whether it is ordinary proper names of individuals like ‘ahmad,’ ‘mustafa,’ ‘yousef,’ or ‘hatem,’ or the names with different and higher connotations like ‘mohammad,’ ‘solomon,’ ‘jesus,’ or ‘buddha,’ she completely dispenses with capitalisations. This is the ‘de-hierarchisation’ of an established oppressive order, and moreover, a democratisation

⁵For a detailed study on hip-hop as a tool of protest for the Black community in America, see Rose Tricia’s book, *Black Noise. Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*.

destroying the set pattern in which an automatic attachment of meaning occurs as using words like ‘God,’ ‘President,’ ‘Father,’ or ‘White’ is to use capitalised signifiers where we mechanically imbue the signifieds with higher connotations. To avoid this and reversing the order Hammad deliberately breaks the regulations of syntax and orthography in order to reflect the level of content on the level of form. Regarding Hammad’s use of the hip-hop technique as a form of resistance in poetry, Katharina Motyl, in her essay “Born Palestinian, Born Black – Hip Hop as a Means of Criticism of Palestinian Marginalization in Suheir Hammad’s *breaking poems*,” remarks:

. . . Hammad’s use of hip hop, which has always voiced the grievances of those at the bottom of society, gives her voice the air of authenticity when it voices criticism on behalf of Palestinians, who arguably find themselves near the bottom of the International Community, in terms of power and esteem by other nations (at least the Western ones). (Motyl n.p., n.d.)

What is more, this is also a use of language that subverts logic and the rational, and the elements of the language that constrains the free play of meaning, making Hammad’s practice a prototype of *écriture féminine*.⁶

Hammad’s poetic sensibility gives a voice to the ‘Other’ in the Western society. Her poetic sensibility moves freely between two very important aspects—the multivocal entity of the authorial self and her identity as a Palestinian. *Born Palestinian, Born Black* is her first collection of poetry, and in 1996 when it was published, she was only twenty-three years of age. Therefore, quite as a formal introduction of

⁶The concept of *écriture féminine* as proposed by the French feminist theoretician Hélène Cixous denotes a feminine style of writing that is completely distinct and opposed to male language and discourse; in short, revealing the stereotypes made by patriarchal norms and then consciously breaking with a style of her/ his own, the writer practises what Cixous calls *écriture féminine*. Naturally, Hammad’s practice of the language is an example of *écriture féminine*.

herself as a practitioner of the art of poetry in relation to her original and the new hyphenated identity, the first poem “dedication” frames the entire collection—she starts the project in the history of the resistance for the liberation of Palestine by telling us the story of her uncle’s exile from his homeland. Using the word ‘*phalesteen*,’ in this poem, which is Arabic for Palestine, and many other Arabic words in other poems of this collection, Hammad includes the Palestinian-American topos into the mainstream Western literature. One important and very common agenda of all non-Western literatures, be it Asian-American or African-American, is to expose the Orientalist stereotypes as politically motivated constructs.⁷ Hammad’s poems in *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, do that in a way that bears the stamp of the virtuoso performance of the poet. Along with this, Hammad in her poems in *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, carefully and consciously deconstructs the misconceptions and the stereotypes—Arab men as brutal beings, the exoticisation of the Third World women etc. The formation of these stereotypes—as Edward Said’s classic study *Orientalism* (1978) has made us see through—results in one common conclusion, i.e. the East lacks civilisation that the West has achieved. Moreover, when we look at the statistics provided by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell in their study *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (2010), we find that about Hindus, Buddhists, and especially Muslims, Americans feel less positive than about Christians or Jews. Hammad’s deconstruction of all these stereotypes through her poetry is commendable as in the poems like “blood stitched time,” “taxi,” “suicide watch,” “one stop (hebron revisited),” “scarlet rain,” “argela remembrance,” “children of stone,” “yo baby yo,” “silence,” “dead woman,” “table tears,” “99 cent lipstick,” “brown bread hero,” “exotic,” “our mothers and their lives of suffer,” “may i take your order?,” “ismi,” “we spent the fourth of july in bed,” “broken and beirut” etc. Hammad has achieved the role of a crusader who “thinks of exchanging her books and pencils/ for a knife a small pistol” (“dedication,” 73-74). What he says in “dedication” is about continuity for her dead uncle who was brutally shot and killed by Israeli soldiers as she narrates in the

⁷By non-Western, we meant the non-White literatures of the world following the White-Black binary as it is put into a new problematic by Hammad in her “preface.”

poem. Nonetheless, the violence that is invoked by Hammad's wish to take up a knife and a pistol is actually channelized in a different way, she chose a different form of violence—a literary violence with which she ultimately decides to retell the stories of her people, thus challenging the impressions of the brutality associated with the deaths of numerous Palestinians, and this becomes the poet's claim for her artistic articulation and right to re-define strategies of struggle and the means of resistance.

Born Palestinian, Born Black hence becomes a remapping of the homeland, a re-construction of the home against all sorts of forceful displacement, de-humanisation, formation of stereotypes, and socio-economic and religio-political injustices. Her writing becomes a space for contestation challenging the hegemonic practices of the society and a space for unmasking the dark workings of power as is evident in her denial to become the 'exotic':

don't wanna be your exotic
some delicate fragile colorful bird
imprisoned caged
in a land foreign to the stretch of her wings

...

don't wanna be your exotic
your lovin my beauty aint more than
funky fornication plain pink perversion
in fact nasty necrophilia
cause my beauty is dead to you
i am dead to you

not your
harem girl geisha doll banana picker
pompom girl pump um shorts coffee maker
town whore belly dancer private dancer
lamalinche venus hottentot laundry girl
your immaculate vessel emasculating princess

don't wanna be
your erotic
not your exotic ("exotic," 1-34)

What we find here is a conscious negation of becoming the Western model of beautiful lass because that is to accept passivity of consciousness; the adjectives like 'delicate,' 'fragile,' and 'colourful' invoke a kind of Romantic association, a concept where beauty is primarily formal. Denying to feed this 'popular' and stereotypical demand of physical charm is to achieve a nonconformist stance on the part of the poet/ woman who has for herself a different concept of beauty going much beyond the formal aspects of the body. Since the dominant Western male gaze cannot go beyond the physical it is nothing more than 'funky fornication.' Moreover, Hammad calls this a "plain pink perversion" because this gaze believes in the passivity of the woman's self, a complete submission with all her physical charms; however, the woman who denies this is of course dead to this standard of beauty. Hence the Western praise of the beauty is "in fact nasty necrophilia," a mere love of the dead self of the woman. To deny to play this role of the dead is to deny to become the prototypes of all the dead selves—'harem girl,' 'geisha doll,' 'banana picker,' 'pompom girl,' 'pumpum shorts,' 'coffee maker,' 'town whore,' 'belly dancer,' 'private dancer,' '*La Malinche*,' 'Venus Hottentots,' 'laundry girl' or their too 'immaculate vessel,' or an 'emasculating princess'—being deprived of any strength or vigour. What is interesting to note is that it is not only Western gaze that she registers but the gaze that everywhere makes a woman a passive object, a mere commodity. Her vision is not confined to any geographical area, but is spread to places beyond geographical or metaphorical borders—her denial to be 'erotic' or to be 'exotic' exemplifies her holistic idea of women's liberation from a passive self-chosen by mores of patriarchy.

Of course Hammad continues with her uncle's struggles that he vividly narrated but she expands it by remapping the borders and situates the Palestinian struggle in a wider and universal form of struggle—a struggle for existence. Already we have seen in her "preface" how Hammad poetically repositions this struggle by linking

her writings with liberation, consciousness and the free choice of labels or words. The blending of poetry and prose, of free verse and hip-hop help her in this conscious act of reposition. In her powerful essay, "Transformative Practices and Historical Revision: Suheir Hammad's *Born Palestinian, Born Black*," Sirene Harb attempts a detailed analysis of Hammad's practice of the subversion of the hierarchical order and her effort to find a separate and equal identity for the marginalised of the Third World. Harb comments:

Hammad's approach shows how a critique of the practices embedded within the hegemonic function of dominant discourses can be based in modified/transformed strategies of articulation (rather than new ones), working from the inside to redefine both center and margins. As she problematizes racial and gendered assumptions underlying essentialist approaches to models of self, Hammad constructs identity as a transformative engagement with the issues of different minorities and with possibilities of collective struggle. Such possibilities originate from the identification of commonalities in the ethnic American and Palestinian colonial ordeals, as both have not only political but also economic and socio-historical bases. (Harb 2008)

What Harb points out is that Hammad is engaged into combining multiple voices in order to destabilise the notions of difference and all sorts of relativism. That is how it goes beyond Palestinian struggle and this effort forms a movement combining both cultural arenas and all possible physical topographies mediating a re-narrativisation of the self as well as the Other where the self is nothing but a deeper understanding of the Other, the Other's experiences and struggles. Hammad's practice is then not anything new but a transformation of the ordinary order, a rearrangement or reshaping of the old map. It showcases how, to quote Michel Foucault from his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), "a change in the order of discourse does not presuppose 'new ideas,' a little invention and creativity, a different

mentality, *but* transformations in a practice, perhaps also in neighbouring practices, and in their common articulation” (209). The deep perception, the insight into the elements of the experiences of the Other, yields to a broader perspective that we have mentioned earlier. The mapping of the continuation of the oppressive practices and strategies of marginalisation are identified and a re-mapping occurs with the poet’s effort of resistance in her poetry, thus liberating resistance from the narrowness of one’s personal experience to a broader spectrum of the collective as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) suggests in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. This is evident in the poem, “manifest destiny,” where Hammad writes, “we struggling to understand/ we were where we needed to be/ we are who we have to be” (26-28). The poetics of the ‘I’ or the self is taken to a higher plane to the ‘we’ or the collective and the process involves representing the ‘Other’ as the self. The personal and the political intersect at one point, the revision of the struggle takes place, and the poet suggests alternative locations for the marginalised self, the Other.

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