ISSN 2455-393X

Journal of the English Literator Society

Volume 11 Issue 6 November 2025 | www.jels.in

Research Article

Motherhood, Motherland, and the Gendered Refugee Experience in Contemporary Slam Poetry

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Published online: 5 November 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17528659

ABSTRACT

The gendered conception of a 'mother' nation is a recurring trope in nationalist literature that constructs the woman's body as a bearer of nationalist cultural values and its idealised citizen, while nationalism itself becomes a masculine ideal. The paper examines how slam poets like Rafeef Ziadah, Emitithal Mahmoud, and Muna Abdulahi vocalise their diasporic experience and reinvigorate memories of a diminishing motherland. Through a few select works of these writers, this paper intends to trace the contemporary re-formulations of the 'mother-ised' land amidst intergenerational and transnational refugee women forced to flee from their homes due to genocidal violence. The paper hopes to show how the conflation of the body of the nation with the body of the woman goes beyond implications of patriarchal control to draw out a matrilineal heritage of blood and bonds to a homeland quickly disappearing under genocidal threats. In such cases, the woman's body also bears witness to the violence imposed on the land/body. Moreover, the paper also analyses the diasporic experience and identity formulation of the daughters of refugees, and how it is often built on links to the motherland, formulated almost entirely on nostalgic cultural impressions and traditions relayed through maternal bonds.

KEYWORDS: Motherland, Matrilineal Memory, Refugee Narratives, Diaspora

FULL PAPER

On 19 November 2023, General Giora Eiland of the Israeli occupational force openly wrote that the women of Palestine are inherently part of the 'Hamas infrastructure' as they are "all the mothers, sisters or wives of Hamas murderers'" and ought to be wiped out through targeted epidemics (*The New Arab*). Conversely, in 2013, Israel came under international scrutiny for the unconsented sterilization of Ethiopian immigrant women living in Israel (Greenwood, 2013). Both the incidents show how the conceptualisation of a nation is deeply intertwined with the reproductive capacity and interests of the women living within its borders. Palestinian women formulate a nation of Palestinian 'terrorists', and the idealized Israeli identity cannot be intermixed with a foreign blood line. Similar claims were made from Nazi Germany to Apartheid South Africa wherein sexual and reproductive interest of the woman was often seen as a threat to national and racial identity.

These ideas are further imbibed into a nation's cultural framework through recurring cultural tropes of the all-suffering mother-nation and its forever filial citizens. Thus, national personifications such as the Indian Bharat Mata, drawing on culturally ingrained patriarchal ideologies, create a narrative wherein the women's body become the bearer of its future citizen and the nationalist cultural values that will frame the identity of the former. The feminised personification of the nation was often created to evoke a united sentiment when faced with external threats or internal strife. Fighting for the honour and validation of a maternal figure would be more familiar than striving for the sake of abstract borders or governments. Hence, the language and cultural codes of patriarchy are used to formulate the patriotism of the common man and create the idea that under the grievance of a unified mother the citizens suffer equally. Consequently, in traditional usage of such tropes, women become the upholders of the cultures and values of the nation while nationalism becomes an inescapable masculine ideal that women are neither privy to nor encouraged to aspire to in the way men are. Furthermore, nationalist literature using the language of the mother-ised nation, often constructs martyrdom as the masculine ideal that is rewarded and valorised under the mother's love and remembrance.

However, taking up the example of the Indian Bharat Mata, critics like Karen Gabriel and PK Vijayan have questioned such formulations of the 'mother nation' for its underlying exclusionary discourse that invisiblise and invalidate a vast population of India that does not resemble or arise from such a figure. Moreover, the conventional

usage of such tropes also enables regulation and restrictions on women's reproductive and sexual rights by coding abstract notions of honour and shame into it. Thus, under such discourses, fortifying the nation also becomes a matter of fortifying the women.

This paper is an attempt to read through such discourses that feminises the nation and nationalises the feminine as it is applied by intergenerational and transnational refugee women in the recollections of their 'mother' lands where violent and genocidal purgation are constantly committed. These are areas under threat from internal or external strife, on the verge of complete erasure, and traumatised under recurrent mass massacres, and thus cannot offer the sense of security and unification traditional formulations of the 'mother-ised' homeland grants. Moreover, the paper also seeks to showcase, how beyond being the bearers of national culture and its children, the women borne out of these war-torn situations also bear witness to the atrocities committed onto them/the nation. They become the bearers of blood, bonds, and the memories of the nation's itself that is to be passed onto a generation of refuges growing up away from their homelands. Hence, the paper argues the conflation of the body with the nation goes beyond mere implications of patriarchal control to draw out a matrilineal lineage of a homeland quickly disappearing under genocidal threats. Drawing from this, the paper also analyses the gendered diasporic experience and identity formulation of the daughters of refugees, whose links to the 'motherland' is more literal, wherein the land is almost identified only through the nostalgic cultural codes and preserved traditions relayed through maternal bonds.

While the language of the feminised nation state has been propagated through multifarious cultural and literal texts, nationalist poetry has been a constant and key factor in the endeavour across nations. Walt Whitman configures America as a "A grand, sane, towering, seated mother", while Sarojini Naidu see the anti-colonial India as a "bride high mated with the spheres" in charge of bearing glories from her 'ageless womb'. While Nationalist poetry remains prominent in the struggle for liberation amidst war-torn lands, Contemporary Slam poetry, a form of spoken word poetry that combines performance, poetry, and politics, has often provided a unique platform to young diasporic poets due to its informal, unconventional, and accessible nature. Moreover, slam poetry competitions and venues are primarily hosted within the western world whose governmental powers are often negligent if not openly complicit in the violence taking place in these refugees' poet's homelands. Thus, coupled with the inherently explosive and emotional nature of the medium, Slam poetry offers a space for the artist to speak directly to the aggressors just as much as they speak on behalf of their homelands.

Thus, slam poets like the Palestinian- Canadian Rafeef Ziadah, Sudanese-American Emitithal Mahmoud and Somali- American Muna Abdulahi, despite differing socio-historical backgrounds find similar modes of expression in their poetry

to vocalise their diasporic experience and reinvigorate memories of a diminishing motherland shadowed under immense genocidal violence. For the purpose of this paper, this study has limited itself primarily to the works of these three aforementioned poets, particularly in the poems "Shades of Anger" and "We Teach Life, Sir" by Rafeef Ziadah, "Sudan Balady", "The Colours We Ascribe" and "MAMA" by Emi Mahmoud, and "Daughter of Intersectionality", "Cultural Relatives" and "The Unwritten Letter from my Immigrant Parents" by Muna Abdulahi. The writers have been chosen for their similar diasporic-refugee existence amidst the western world, and also the rhetoric of matrilineality their poem takes recourse to.

The Mother(land)s of Warzones

Traditional Nationalist narratives of a feminised nation perceive this figurative mother within its own geographical borders. This rhetoric is used to inspire or instigate its own citizens, create a sense of reinvigorated national identity, or create a common sense of goal or ideal to fight towards, all to primarily its own people living within the national boundaries of the state. In comparison the mother-ised lands of the refugee imagination are deliberately brought out of the national boundaries and presented to the world at large.

"Today, my body was a TV'd Massacre," frames the opening lines to Rafeef Ziadah's much quoted poem "We Teach Life, Sir". Ziadah writes of her own experience as a vocal Palestinian activist in the west trying to counter the western narratives of terrorism and hatred inscribed on the Palestinian struggle while. The poem is also largely evocative of the Palestinian homeland and its current position within the western world... In Ziadah's poetry, while the motherland is feminised under priorly mentioned discourses of nationalism, it's also encased in the body of a woman whose existence is also outside the national boundary as her defeat and 'massacre' is televised for the world to see. This notion of the motherland has to step back from her boundaries, and the politics of her motherland, to articulate the realities for others to see.

This is further facilitated as the narrative emerges from refugee slam poets who live and articulate their struggle from outside the national boundaries. The genocidal violence that marks their 'original' homeland, and the mass displacement it has caused among its native people, also warrants that the imagination of the motherland has to exist outside of its boundaries held together by the values and aspiration of its refugee population living in different parts of the world. Thus, Ziadah's mother-ised land does not merely belong to the Palestinians living and fighting within the borders, she is also reinvigorated through the struggles of immigrant Palestinians trying to shed light on the atrocities happening. This ensures that, it's also a motherland that is deliberately or

otherwise made visible to the world at large. In contemporary slam poetry, this idea is further highlighted in two ways.

Firstly, she is made into a figure that is consciously screened to the world. This mother has larger audience facing her and she uses it to shed light onto the injustices done to her 'children'. She asks to be made visible and heard in her own terms while countering the western imaginations, stereotypes and regulations imposed upon her.

"Sorry, should I not scream?
I forgot to be your every orientalist dream
Jinnee in a bottle, belly dancer, harem girl, soft spoken Arab woman
Yes master, no master.
Thank you for the peanut butter sandwiches
raining down on us from your F16's master
Yes my liberators are here to kill my children
and call them "collateral damage" (Ziadah, "Shades of Anger")

Thus, she is aware of her presentations, and idealised discourses wherein the idea of the otherised- nation is constructed by the western orientalist imaginations. She refuses to remain as an eroticised stereotype or depoliticised 'sound bite' used under guise of western morality or stay in the "The bottom of a crater/ reduced to a Footnote in a world said to be in crisis" (Mahmoud, Sudan Balady)

Secondly, this motherland takes the figure of the refugee woman itself, forced out of her home, subjected to inhuman genocidal violence under her captors, often loosing children and relatives in her struggle to survive and finally finding herself in a foreign land that "doesn't even know how to pronounce you correctly"(Abdullahi, "Letter"). Yet, like the poets themselves, she puts herself in platforms available to her and recounts the stories of her homeland, both the good and the bad in hopes of a return if not a reclamation.

The second point of variance from most traditional nationalist outlooks is that the concept of motherland constructed by the slam poets, instead of merely instigating the men into action, are often the figures at the forefront, invoking violence, vengeance, and resistance.

"My flavour is insurrection, it is rebellion, resistance/ my flavour is mutiny/ it is burden, it is grit, and it is compromise" (Mahmoud, "Mama"). The motherland itself becomes the rebellious figure or invokes the narrative of women with "bruised wrists and titanium plated spines. The daughters of widows wearing the wings of amputees" (Mahmoud). In other words, the land itself becomes a resistive force. She is not only to be protected but the anger is coded within her, and her children seemingly merely draws from it to articulate their own struggle.

This resistance of the woman occurs in multiple ways. From speaking a language that is being colonised, to expressing anger, refusing to give into the depoliticized definitions of western powers to the very act of giving birth, all becomes an act of resistance from the mother body.

"And did you hear my sister screaming yesterday
as she gave birth at a check point
with Israeli soldiers looking between her legs
for their next demographic threat" (Ziadah, "Shades")

Traditional Nationalist discourses frames the womb as being distressed or 'stricken' during times of war (Naidu, lines 4-6), echoing a sense of maternal pain and incapability, but here the womb itself is the resistance, she refuses to halt her reproductive capability and claims that her children will be rebels that the world would tag as threats. This idea remains poignant among the oppressors attempts at murdering babies and calling out for epidemics that would wipe out the women. Thus, instead of martyrdom, righteous anger is invoked.

"So let me just tell you this womb inside me
will only bring you your next rebel .

She will have a rock in one hand and a Palestinian flag in the other
I am an Arab woman of color
Beware! Beware my anger…" (Ziadah)

In comparison, In Abdulahi's and Mahmoud's poems, the resistance is jaded seemingly as result of the genocide that has already occurred and took its tool where the Palestinian struggle is still an ongoing one, and a motif of protection and mournfulness is imposed upon the idea of the motherland by paralleling her with the refugee mother and her struggles of survival.

Mahmoud forlornly asks a defeated motherland, "Sudan *Balady*, my love, /Who did this to you, who stripped you bare/and turned all your children loose" (Mahmoud), while simultaneously invoking the traces of the resistance and resilience of the motherland in her own mother. The notion of motherhood granted here is one inherently injected with resilience due to the sufferings and bloodshed written onto her body. This is mother that "carries all of us in her body/ on her face, in her blood and/ Blood is no good once you let it loose/ So she always holds us close" (Mahmoud, "Head over Heels"), even in foreign land where her children struggle to survive.

This essentially creates a concept of refugee motherland, that works to link together all the migrants related to her. Muna Abdulah, famously calls this notion of a refugee motherland and the relations that can be traced from it within the migrant community as 'cultural relatives' wherein, "family tree does not consist of a blood

relatives/ my family tree consists of people who shed blood for each other/ and my culture has been, shedding blood for generations you see"("Cultural Relatives"). Thus, such a construction echoes the presence of a motherland that will forever remain foreign to the refugees chased out of its home boundaries, however they carry along the values, hopes and aspiration and find a spiritual linkage in the idea of a common blood line. The Motherland mourns her children, but she also swears retribution on behalf of them, and codes her own values upon the surviving members.

Finally, in contemporary slam poetry the motherland does not take the form of the ideal woman or the idealised discourse of motherhood, instead her image is drawn onto the body of the everyday women. For Ziadah, The Palestinian motherland is represented in the refugee woman who has to tell 'bite sized' stories of their massacres to western audience, she is also present in the common Palestinian women giving birth to her baby girl, and she is also present in the reference to Amna Mona, a debateable freedom fighter noted for her role in killing a Jewish settler. To Mahmoud and Abdullahi, the motherland takes the figure of the refugee mothers, who survive in silence carrying the wounds and culture together. This motherland is also echoed in the faces of the refugee daughters of diaspora, who "speak, learn, jump, fail, fall, and get back up" (Abdullahi, "Letter") in the language of the motherland. They tell her stories, utter her name, and survive as the reminders of the land that once used to be.

Thus, the notion of womanhood imposed on the refugee concept of motherland is both transnational and intergeneration. While familiar tropes of the fallen or broken-hearted motherland are visible, slam poetry primarily evokes a resilient version of womanhood in association with the motherland. Ziadah sees her as a revolutionary giving rise to more revolutionaries, while Abdulahi and Mahmouds perceives her in the refugee struggle and diasporic societies. She is more inclusionary, particularly in her acceptance of what is outside the homeland just as much as what is inside. While the rhetoric of reproductivity is used, it's to code an inherent notion of female heritage and survival. Or to show the resilience within female identity in rebuilding itself time after time amidst the violence and bloodshed they walk through.

The Maternal Survivors: Bearers of Blood, Bonds and Violence.

"Ms. Ziadah/ don't you think that everything would be resolved if you would just stop teaching so much hatred to your children?" is the question the poet is asked by an unnamed interview, Ziadah responds by the titular "We teach life, sir". 'Hatred' here refers to the Palestinian resistance movement in general, but particularly its invocative of the memoires of violence that the mother passes onto the child.

Ziadah continues, "We Palestinians teach life after they have occupied the last sky./ We teach life after they have built their settlements and apartheid walls, after the last skies." Here the refugee mothers become the primary teacher of culture, heritage,

values and eventually the stories of injustices to a generation that is growing up in foreign lands. They transfer the names of people and places their children will never get to meet, and the continuation of those memories eventually becomes a point of threat to the oppressor. The poet's response is a response quoted by the surviving refugee mothers who not only bears children and values within their body, but scars of the violence imposed upon the body that are often unspeakable.

These are women that "carry countries between their shoulder blades" (Mahmoud, "Mama"), thus bearing the violence of the homeland and the migratory experience. The trauma pervades them and is also transferred onto the children. "War does not end the moment guns shop shooting," (Abdullahi, "Explaining Depression") Muna Abdullahi recalls her mother coming to that realization, she further notes that this trauma is transferred onto the next generation, wherein the "Somali diaspora is still running and running and running" even past international boundaries. So, the diasporic daughters often articulate the violence they witness even when it sounds too harsh for a bundle of wires/ and an audience to swallow". (Mahmoud, "Colours we Ascribe")

Moreover, all three poets create a lineage of matrilineality, wherein bloodline are traced through the mothers that carry these memories, and eventually traced back to a claim in the motherland.

"…my grandmother kneels and pray
in a village hidden between Jaffa and Haifa
my mother was born under an olive tree
on a soil they say is no longer mine
but I will cross their barriers, their check points
their damn apartheid walls and return to my homeland" (Ziadah, "Shades of Anger")

For the diasporic daughters, it is these lineages that create any sense if identity regarding a land they are unfamiliar to. "I am a daughter who has not yet met her motherland/ I am foster homes jumping from nation to nation/ I have an accent in every language in every country and every land but the one my body has yet to meet" recites Abdullahi in the poem "Daughter of Intersectionality". To the refuge children, their hybridized identity is often built on links to the motherland formulated almost entirely on the nostalgic cultural codes and traditions relayed through maternal bonds.

This lineage, coupled with the intergenerational trauma amidst the racial experience within the western world, carries with it apprehensions. "I'm afraid to write this blood line into something that I'll love./ This pain is encoded, our genes come to fruition on our skin," (Mahmoud, "Colours We Ascribe") From mother to daughter, it is the women that carry the pain, the memories, the culture, and the resilience to survive even past the boundaries of nation and markers of nationhood.

This is also a lineage that retains hopes and aspirations along with the trauma of violence, either in the form of continued struggle when the mother names her daughter "Janeen" in hopes that she will see the land she is named after, or in the forms of diasporic daughters and the place they create for themselves that enables them to "take my [the mother's] culture and our native tongue and speak, learn, jump, fail, fall, speak, learn, jump, fail, fall, and get back up, my daughter". (Abdullahi, "Letter")

Conclusion

Thus, the paper has traced out alternative discourses on the feminised notion of motherland emerging from refugee narratives, particularly within contemporary slam poetry. The depiction of the motherland in the poems is one deliberately presented to the world, unconfined by geographical or spiritual boundaries, coded either in revolution or resilience and reflective of the everyday woman trying to survive in oppressed lands native to her or otherwise. Moreover, the paper also examines how mothers from warzones bear witness to the violence and carry the trauma of their sufferings. It also notes how this trauma is intergenerationally transferred and used by the national diaspora to make sense of their identity particularly in the absence of the homeland.

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