https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2024.12.3.929

The European Journal of
Humour Research 12 (3) 53–66
www.europeanjournalofhumour.org

Puns and pain in Palestine: black comedy as cultural resistance in Ahmed Masoud's *The Shroud Maker*

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Abstract

Ahmed Masoud's The Shroud Maker *packs a powerful punch in using the implicative potential of black comedy as a site of resistance. Masoud deploys black comedy to resist and assert control over the exploitative discourse and action against the Palestinians living in Gaza. He does this by using black humour as a tool of alienation to detach people from their trauma, break the fourth wall to make the audience complicit, as a weapon to challenge Israeli dominant discourse, and to assert Palestinian control over the war's narrative. Dark humour walks the thin line between humour and conflict in the play where "battered by injustice, but still defiant," the eighty-four-year-old protagonist, Hajja Souad, a shroud maker by profession, introduces trauma through humour and then tips the balance in favour of trauma. Through her offensive jokes and satiric thrust, the play confronts the desensitisation of violence against Palestinians by evoking a reaction in the audience—laughter, followed by reflection on their laughter. While the balancing act between humour and trauma is maintained,* The Shroud Maker *argues that humour is perhaps the most effective way of communicating and ascribing responsibility to its spectators. Ahmed Masoud puts forth an alternative way of discussing political violence and war beyond the dominant western narrative that marginalises the Palestinian voice. Relaying the tragedy of violence and culture wars through dark humour underscores the message of resistance, coping and persistence in Palestine.*

Keywords: *black comedy, humour, trauma, cultural resistance, Global South.*

1. Introduction

Ahmed Masoud's *The Shroud Maker* is an incisive social commentary on the efficacy of comedy as a form of resistance against subjugation. It provides a compelling psychological analysis of how oppression and the tools we use to combat it can drastically alter an individual. Masoud scripted the play in 2018 in London after reading an interview with a Palestinian woman on a local news website about keeping her shroud shop open during the 2014 Israel-Gaza war. The journalist asked the woman if she was scared of the terror campaign around her, but she quipped that it was "good for business" and that she had "nothing left to fear" (Masoud, 2018, p. iv). The incongruity of the woman's bold statement made Masoud laugh through his tears and cope with the distressing uncertainty of news about his family's safety in Gaza. Though the Israeli-Gaza war ended a few weeks later, and "nothing happened, nothing changed," the audacious answer by this woman captured the intention behind Masoud's choice of staging humour, dark enough for an audience to experience the absurdity of violence and trauma caused by decades of conflict in Palestine (Masoud, 2018, p. vi). Masoud writes that *The Shroud Maker* is a black comedy on the current situation "to highlight the humanity of people, the sense of humour and the great instinct of survival that a lot of people around the world have" (Al-Jadir, 2018).

If humour is a vehicle to communicate deeply rooted thoughts, and a mechanism to help individuals to cope with and "survive emotional and physical suffering, imprisonment, illness, and loss" (Dziegielewski et al., 2004, p.80), Masoud's protagonist, Hajja Souad's "grimly humorous stance" is a response to the hostile reality of Palestine that is at once a "coping device and a weapon" (Colletta, 1999, p. 7). Souad underplays trauma and suffering through her comical treatment of what is terrifying and morbid. Her offensive jokes subvert the Israeli exploitative discourse and action against people in Palestine, break the fourth wall, and reassert a sense of control over her situation. She pushes the audience to laughter, provoking them to "go beyond the laughter and fathom the layers of politics that levity might generally camouflage" (Perera & Pathak, 2022, p. 2). Masoud incorporates dark humour into the play for the audience to consider harsh reality of Palestinian life in a more digestible way. In humanising Souad, he encourages us to understand her traumas through empathy rather than pity.

The idea of black comedy as a site of resistance manifests in *The Shroud Maker* in a rather unique manner, with dark humour acting as a subtle cultural counterattack—one that utilises the thin line between laughter and adversity. There are many instances in the play where Masoud's protagonist, Souad, appeals to a general sense of humour but does so while maintaining the integrity of Palestinian trauma; not only does *The Shroud Maker* embody dark humour, it also willingly employs it. By "employing" humour, the play keeps its events grounded in conflict, but it is only apparent if the reader chooses to engage in Palestinian history—which in itself is a medium of cultural resistance. Masoud presents historical trauma in the play through the character of Hajja Souad and her importance as a symbol of experience, and then implicates the audience as the witness to Palestinian trauma. Together, these two sites of resistance mediate between humour and the need to prime a generation with weaponised trauma. "It reaches people's hearts. It cuts through to the chase. It cuts through all of the shit in there . . . and the stuff around it. . . and the stereotypes," says Masoud in his defence of black comedy in *The Shroud Maker* (A. Masoud, personal communication, 14 September 2023). Souad's story is Masoud's story and Palestine's story. Since October 2023, when Israel launched a frontal attack on Gaza after Hamas' military offensive, Masoud's use of dark humour to resist and cope with trauma in a play performed in 2018 continues to push back against the dominant Western stereotypes about Palestinians; it gives a message of hope amid the ongoing violence in Palestine.

2. Black comedy as resistance in the Global South

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines *black comedy* as a kind of drama (or, by extension, a non-dramatic work) in which disturbing or sinister subjects like death, disease, or warfare are treated with bitter amusement, usually in a manner calculated to offend and shock (Baldick, 2001, p. 36). It presents tragic, distressing, or morbid topics in humorous terms. The use of black comedy in a Global South context is deliberately political and predicated on the unequal power dynamics of the oppressor and the oppressed, the centre and the margin. It is crucial to acknowledge that Global South countries straddle the legacy of colonialism in the past and grapple with issues of neocolonialism, racism, classism, ethnic polarities, refugee crisis, corruption, subalternity, precarity, and environmental crises in the present. The Global South references an "entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained" (Connell & Dados, 2012, p. 13). Crisis and comedy in the Global South become easy bedfellows when "flexibility, spontaneity, agility and creativity are hindered," and "personal freedoms are most seriously curtailed" (Perera & Pathak, 2022, p. 6). Under such inequitable circumstances, the disempowered search for ways to challenge the status quo, and for Masoud, black comedy effectively defies hegemonic narratives and denies the Israeli's control over the Palestinian spirit of survival.

Although humour in Global South theatre is a relatively understudied subject, several playwrights have used humour effectively as a site of resistance to critique colonial stereotypes, provide counter-information and debunk the myth of neocolonial progress. Maghrebian playwright Kateb Yacine's *Intelligence Powder* (1959) is a carnivalesque farce on the legacy of French colonialism, illiteracy, and the spuriousness of Algerian religious, intellectual, and political thought. Indian playwright Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* (1975) is a dark comedy on banditry as an alternative to Nehruvian socialism. In *Pantomime* (1978), Caribbean playwright Derek Walcott uses calypso humour as a form of dissent to challenge the coloniser-colonised dynamic and racial politics. If Egyptian absurdist Tawfik al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* (1966) is darkly comic in its fantastical comparison of the inefficacy of Egyptian authorities to cockroaches, Efua T Sutherland uses the trickster figure of Anansi to satirise neocolonial materialism in postcolonial Ghana in *Marriage of Anansewa* (1975). In settler colonies such as Canada and Australia, indigenous playwrights like Drew Hayden Taylor in *The Baby Blues* (1999) and Jimmy Chi & Kuckles in *Bran Nue Dae* (1990) use indigenous and aboriginal humour to explore the history of colonial oppression and its use as an ethnic glue, to move towards truth and reconciliation. While nothing is amusing about the discriminatory relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, incongruous power dynamics in a Global South context create essential "preconditions for humour" (Reichel & Stein, 2005, p. 9). Manfred Pfister writes that laughter is an indicator of tensions and contradictions and functions like a litmus test in assessing the democratic health of a given society. The most significant form of laughter, he iterates, can "arise from the margins, challenging and subverting the established orthodoxies, authorities, and hierarchies" (2002, p. vi-vii).

At this juncture it is critical to consider how continuous violence and apartheid-like conditions in Palestine, amplified by the deep-seated collective trauma it has caused its people, serve as the subject of black comedy. Palestine is uniquely positioned in the global arena as it experiences triple oppression. As a Global South country, it endures the exploitative legacy of British colonialism and its discriminatory markers. It is also a conflict zone and a settler colony. Since the formation of the British Mandate in 1917, Palestinians have dealt with oppressive colonial policies and the biopolitics of an Israeli apartheid state that has systematically eroded their rights. Mitri Raheb writes that the word *conflict* is commonly used to describe the prevailing situation in Palestine, which can be taken to mean a dispute between two parties, a disagreement over land and resources, an argument over holy places deeply connected to identity, or even a struggle between coloniser and colonised (2021, p. 1). Being a conflict zone describes the geopolitical dispute over land and resources that has prevailed since the Balfour Declaration decided to siphon a part of Palestine to create Israel in 1948.

Subsisting in a conflict-prone condition for Palestine is further exacerbated on account of being a settler colony. Resolution of conflict after 1948 has been inconclusive as it underscores a reality for the Palestinians where colonisation is not over and constitutes a continuous experience: "a structure rather than an event" (Wolfe, 1999, p. 1). Colonialism has three foundational concerns, "violence, territory, and population control," and within the context of settler-colonialism, writes Elia Zureik, the Israeli state policies have included "violence, repressive state laws, and racialised forms of surveillance" (2016, p. 3). A drastic occupational apparatus imposed itself until today, echoes Kamal, which included "land confiscation, cutting down olive trees, building illegal colonies, building the apartheid wall, and imprisoning hundreds of Palestinians" (2023, p. 2). The Human Rights Council report confirms that Israel continues to control the Gaza Strip through various means effectively. According to the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Israel maintains control of Gaza's airspace and maritime areas, and any activity in these areas is subject to the approval of Israel. The facts since the 2005 disengagement, among them the continuous patrolling of the territorial sea adjacent to Gaza by the Israeli Navy and constant surveillance flights of Israel Defence Forces (IDF) aircraft, in particular remotely piloted aircraft, demonstrate the continued exclusive control by Israel of Gaza's airspace and maritime areas which – with the exception of limited fishing activities – Palestinians are not allowed to use (2015, p. 8).

This century-old dispute since British colonisation and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, culture, and agency has resulted in hopelessness that empowers fearlessness and recklessness. Even if one were to discount the human casualties during the multiple wars with Israel since 1948, the Israel-Gaza war of 2014 – the immediate context of Masoud's play – had devastating consequences. The death toll alone speaks volumes: 2,251 Palestinians were killed, including 1,462 Palestinian civilians, of whom 299 women and 551 children; and 11,231 Palestinians, including 3,540 women and 3,436 children, were injured (Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 153), of whom 10 percent suffered permanent disability as a result. Palestinians struggled to find ways to save their own lives and those of their families, with no way of knowing which locations would be hit and which might be considered safe. Closed into the Strip, with no possibility to exit at times, 44 percent of Gaza was either a no-go area or the object of evacuation warnings. Souad's biting humour reflects on these terrifying circumstances of displacement and hopeless socio-economic conditions of subjugated Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. It provides relief in its reflection of and resistance in taking back control over the war's narrative. The first scene in *The Shroud Maker* anchors Souad's point of view; her jokes allow her to momentarily defeat an undefeatable adversary and the war-like conditions around her.

> HAJJA SOUAD. (Shouting) Ah shit, it's you again. Why don't you bloody fuck off? I mean you have a habit of fucking off so why don't you try it again now . . . What? No, I'm not going to leave Gaza, I'm not going anywhere. . . .
>
> (Masoud, 2018, p. 1)

Masoud's use of dark humour willingly punctures the absurdity of continuous violence and warfare. In the context of the irrationality of war, Wong writes:

> There is no greater absurdity than the sacrifice of millions of lives to satisfy the ambition of a few fools. There is no greater grief than to mourn the young men who die horribly for a silly reason. There is no greater tragedy than to repeat the same deadly mistake over and over again without learning from history. The terror and pain are so great that one can only burst out laughing and crying at the same time.
>
> (Wong, 2003, p. 1)

The absurdity of violence is brought up in a set of dark jokes about life and death in *The Shroud Maker*. Souad says, "Everything I make becomes a shroud," which can be interpreted as somewhat of a punchline to an earlier line in the play: "A burial shroud is like your wedding dress and christening robe rolled into one" (Masoud, 2018, p. 4). From the jalabiya that she made for her father as her first sewing project under the tutelage of Lady Cunningham (Masoud, 2018, p. 27) to the wedding dress she made for her daughter-in-law Basma (2018, p. 47), Souad constantly has to bury people in garments that are ironically supposed to represent new beginnings. Souad's biting humour is on point when she says, "A shroud is a once in a life time investment, you only wear it once, so you'd better make sure it fits comfortably" (Masoud, 2018, p. 4).

In his article, Kanaana shares a wealth of information on how "jokes and humor could coexist with so much pain and misery, or even could by generated by it" (1990, p. 231). Jokes as a medium of defiance and collective solidarity have become popular in Palestine since the first Intifada. *Intifada* in Arabic means 'shrugging off', in general, and 'shrugging off' Israeli oppression, in particular. The First Intifada (1987-1993) was a popular uprising that originated from relentless Israeli military control of Palestinian territories, unemployment, bleak economic situation, growing Israeli settler-colonialism, and decline in living standards in the West Bank and Gaza (Miskel, 2004/2005, p. 50). The First Intifada abated with the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993. However, even after the Oslo agreements, the ongoing Israeli occupation unleashed the Second Intifada in 2000, ending in 2005 (Pressman, 2003, p. 1). Intifada humour is tied to the resistance. The jokes that Kanaana collected during his research show the powerful, vernacular, and subversive ways through which ordinary people, often women and children, ridicule the occupiers and represent the reality beneath the one imposed on them (Salih & Devroe, 2014, p. 18). Interestingly, pre-Intifada jokes reflect the Palestinian mood and attitude of self-hatred, disrespect, self-deprecation, and even contempt (Kanaana, 1990, p. 233). However, post-Intifada humour emerges from a context of social and political fragmentation, stagnation, and disenchantment. It reflects the paradoxical juxtaposition of colonial and postcolonial realities (Salih & Devroe, 2014, p. 18). Souad's joke in scene 3 satirises the Israeli's lack of a funny side and the inefficacy of Palestinian military potential.

> Ah . . . this bloody war . . . You see the trouble with the Israelis is that they don't have a sense of humour, they are too serious about things. They mistake our fireworks for rockets . . . I mean really the only way to die from a Palestinian-fired rocket is for an Israeli to be standing in the middle of an open square, watch the rocket as it flies in the sky and follow it to its landing place, then look up, mouth open wide and wait for it to fall straight into the mouth, but they won't die just yet. The ambulance will come and rush them to the hospital, they might die of a traffic accident on the way because of the panic.
>
> (Masoud, 2018, p. 31)

The ease with which Souad cracks dark jokes is a part of her everyday life. Kamal (2023) builds on Kanaana's (1990) research and writes that telling jokes in Palestine is more than "a momentary act" of sharing a humorous anecdote to spend time with friends. It has become a technique of coping and adaptation and transformed into a tool of confrontation against Israeli Occupation and the corrupt political system in Palestine (Kamal, 2023, p.4).

2.1. Exploiting the dominant narrative: "I make money when people die"

The Shroud Maker is set in the Shujaia neighbourhood in the blockaded Gaza Strip. Masoud consciously blends Souad's trauma with the collective trauma of the nation. The historical events of Palestine unfold along with the story of Hajja Souad; it enables readers to understand a broad array of concepts and realities relevant to any Global South settler colony and conflict zone. By beginning the play with the end, the audience is prompted to ask themselves what Souad had to endure to end up how she is, and they are subsequently shown, event by event, how she became the funny, cynical, jaded older woman she is at the end of her life.

The play begins with Souad as an older woman in the middle of the very complicated 2014 Gaza War and then revisits her past during the British mandate in Palestine as the little Souad on the microcosmic scale of Lady Cunningham's house. The *Nakba* in 1948 turns out to be equally traumatic for Souad as it is for Palestine: she suffers the betrayal of Lady Cunningham, her father is killed in the ensuing violence, she gets cut off from her family in Aqqur, and becomes "a fourteen-year-old unmarried mother" of "a tiny baby-boy" (Masoud, 2018, p. 32). Both live through the Six-day War in 1967, and her son Ellian gets married to his beloved Basma. Their marital bliss is short-lived as Ellian is brutally shot by an Israeli soldier while struggling to save Basma from being taken away for interrogation. Souad brings up her traumatised orphaned grandson Ghassan, only to witness his disappearance during the second Intifada. Amid a lifetime of loss and trauma, the sole support in her life is her shroud-making business, and her only escape is sewing shrouds.

It is important to note that the entire play is a one-actor monologue, and Souad manipulates her singular role to tell riveting stories and control the satiric thrust. She weaves multiple instances of trauma throughout her narration of events and uses dark humour to enable herself in an otherwise disabling setting. Like when Souad asserts, "not Moses, please. I am tired of exile and all that" (p. 38). Alternatively, as seen in her statement, "Aged fourteen, I'd become an orphan, a refugee, a mother, and still a virgin" (Masoud, 2018, p. 29). She exploits the hegemonic Israeli narrative to regain control over her life. "I make money when people die," she states in a matter-of-fact tone (Masoud, 2018, p. 3). "Well, business has dried up recently. Not like four years ago during the war on Gaza. Back then, I was selling close to a hundred shrouds a day," she explains as though these circumstances are regular occurrences and sway her business dynamics (Masoud, 2018, p. 2). Black comedy characters are "rhetorical figures" that "mock and subvert norms and societal rules," and Souad's focus on the daily business of selling shrouds contradicts the severity of the moment and situation. She uses the rhetoric of incongruous dialogue to create uneasy laughter (Connard, 2005, p. 17). Souad steers clear of hyping trauma around her. Instead, she asserts authority over the outcome the war would have had on her by deciding to exploit it rather than be passive and have the war happen to her. She has an "agenda to push" while she goes about her daily activities (Connard, 2005, p. 17). The situation is set up against her interest, so she transforms it to her benefit: she helps bury the dead and profits from their loss. In scene 1, Souad grieves that lately, the Israelis have been killing Palestinian fishermen who wander across the sea borders – "Too bad," she quips that the bodies are often washed away, "so their families have no need of a shroud from me, they have nothing to bury" (Masoud, 2018, p. 3). Unaffected by emotion, Souad continues to talk about the profits of her business of selling shrouds to grieving family members. Her exploitation of grief and of the grieving should make her an unlikeable character as evinced in her matter-of-fact statement: "I might have made it big in Paris or Milan – fashion shrouds for the Vogue catalogue, Gucci corpse couture to knock you dead, designer grave garments by Gianni Versace" (Masoud, 2018, p. 7). However, the humour in her story makes the audience focus not just on her but on the sufferings of an entire nation through history. The play becomes a story of the collective.

As the plot progresses, Souad continues her rude banter between answering the telephone and stitching her stories together. In scene 3, the telephone rings in the shop bringing her back to the present:

> HAJJA SOUAD. Ah, why doesn't he leave me alone?!
> *She picks up the phone*
> Hello, you've reached Hajja Souad, Shroud Manufacturers & Suppliers . . . and if you're the Israeli army press any button - I don't give a shit and you can stick it up your arse.
> *She slams down the phone*.
>
> (Masoud, 2018, p. 30)

Souad places war on the back burner for life. At no point is her dialogue rushed or afraid; in fact, she mocks the Israeli tanks, remarking, "I better be ready for their royal arrival . . . How kind of them to provide some genuine fireworks to mark the occasion— F16 rockets no less!" (Masoud, 2018, p. 3). Souad's derision of the Israeli army refuses authority they usually force, disrupting the power dynamic between coloniser and colonised and placing her in a position of authority. She humiliates the Israelis through brash language, so it is no longer a conversation between colonised and coloniser, but between a grandson and his very irate grandmother. Her defiance "denies authority presumed and in so doing, reconfigures the relationship between dominated and subjugated itself" (Bhungalia, 2020, p. 389).

Hajja Souad's acceptance of death is used as comedic relief a few times in the play. For instance, upon dealing with an angry customer who ordered the wrong size shroud for his toddler's corpse, she huffs, "Who cares what they buried him in? Not the kid, that's for sure" (Masoud, 2018, p. 4). This is how Masoud incorporates deep trauma into the play; the joke comes at the expense of the dead child, and the audience becomes deeply uncomfortable at Souad's self-awareness. Souad does not care if we laugh alongside her. Her intimacy with death allows her to navigate the touchy subject as though it were a mundane topic. Scott (1985) argues that resistance is an everyday form of challenge by making use of prescribed roles and language to resist the abuse of power – including things like "rumour, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity" (Scott, 1985, p. 137). Drawing on Scott's thesis, Souad's comic defiance is inextricably woven into her day-to-day routine; it continuously challenges the fluctuating relationship between oppression and resistance.

2.2. Reproductive resistance: "it's a numbers game"

The survival instinct and persistence of the Palestinians is evident, particularly in the intricate connection between life and death, humour and trauma in the play. Souad says, "A burial shroud is like your wedding dress and your christening robe rolled into one" (Masoud, 2018, p. 4). White clothing symbolises the beginning of a new life and the end of life. Later, she tells a story about Abu Shihada, who smuggles in Viagra for the resistance alongside her fabrics. While the story is funny, it is also upsetting because he says, "Every time they kill us, boom boom, we make ten new babies. Reproductive resistance." Only by laughing at the "dead men's erections" (Masoud, 2018, p. 7) can we, as the audience, understand the discomfort and sadness of Abu Shihada. Additionally, the added onomatopoeia, "boom-boom," adds another layer of black comedy by referencing both a euphemism for sex and the sound that a weapon would make; the same sound can be used to describe two completely antithetical concepts. Reproductive resistance is a "numbers game," says Abu Shihada, implying a massive decline in Palestinian population since the *Nakba* in 1948. The humour in this case primarily arises from Abu Shihada bizarre insinuation that Palestinians are resisting Israel's apartheid-like policies oppression by having a lot of sex. A few scenes later, Souad bolsters Shihada's suggestions with a defiant rejoinder – "the unerring Palestinian response to exile and dispossession is to breed like rabbits," she quips (Masoud, 2018, p. 35).

Lurking behind the booming sound of sex and war, procreation and death, is the debate on the systemic marginalisation and biopolitics of the weak in Palestine. Zureik (2016) challenges Israeli policies of Palestinian population control: how do the colonised and the disenfranchised adopt a policy of resistance and survival that relies on thinking about reproductive strategies? He cites a series of real-life examples of Palestinians ramping up their reproduction rates in favour of nationalist considerations. In 2013, the *Aljazeera* newspaper headline stated, "Palestinian inmates 'sneak sperm out of jail'" (quoted in Zuriek, 2016, p. 247). The story explains that a fertility doctor in a Nablus clinic in the West Bank confirmed that a Palestinian detainee in an Israeli prison smuggled his sperm to his wife, who had a child from artificial insemination. The *New York Times* stated that the same fertility clinic assisted fifty Palestinian women to conceive through in-vitro fertilisation (Abu et al. 2013, quoted in Zuriek, 2016, p. 247). *Reuters* (2014) reported that a similar artificial insemination process involving sperm smuggled from jail was reported in Gaza (quoted in Zuriek, 2016, p. 247). Although Abu Shihada's joke is rooted in the vulgarity of discussing "naughty pills"—i.e., Viagra to aid the reproductive resistance—it pushes back the biopolitics of the Israeli state that deems Palestinians as expendable (Masoud, 2018, p. 7). Instead, it portrays them as productive and continuous in their rebellion.

Masoud's sly reference to the influx of Viagra pills to enhance Arab potency and fertility is not merely to induce laughter. Instead, it draws attention to how the Israeli government, since 1948, has been increasingly concerned about the threat of a rapidly growing Arab population in Palestine. It has adopted several concrete steps in its biopolitical strategy against the high Arab birth rate (Zuriek, 2016, p. 277). Foucault asserts that biopolitics deals with "the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power's problem" (quoted in Mansfield, 2008, p. 127). Wolfe concurs when he labels settler colonialism as "inherently eliminatory" of the indigenous population (2006, p. 387). Historically, the systematic "maintenance" of the Arab population has been an ongoing priority for the Israeli government. Twenty years back, Netanyahu, in the official designation of the Finance Minister, made the following widely quoted statement published in *Haaretz*: "If Arabs remain at 20 percent but relations are tense and violent, this will also harm the state's democratic fabric" (Alon & Benn, 2003, quoted in Zuriek, 2016, p. 276). In another interview with Netanyahu - the current Prime Minister - in 2022, Bill Maher asked if 51 percent of Israel became Arab, then would Israel become an apartheid state? Netanyahu responded that only "about 20 percent of Israel's population is Arabs" and insisted it is not an issue because their "demographic balance" is being "maintained" (Menahan, 2022).

"Naughty pills" to enhance fertility and Abu Shihada's "reproductive resistance" being a "numbers game" to keep the population thriving is Masoud's comedic response to the biopolitics of the Israeli state regulating or "maintaining" Palestinian population. Further, after Hamas won the majority of seats in the Palestine National election in 2006, Israel resorted to cutting funds and reducing the food supply to Gaza in the name of fighting terror. Dov Weissglass, the advisor to several Israeli prime minister's after 2006, referred to this practice of choking food supply and other essential goods to Gaza in a statement loaded with dark humour: "It is like an appointment with a dietician. The Palestinians will get a lot thinner, but won't die" (Zureik, 2016, p. 437). The play's symbiotic relationship between life and death is effective because dark humour pushes back against the dominant narrative that deems Palestinians unproductive or divided: a way of finding life in death.

2.3. Challenging the imperial gaze: "he knew nothing"

Black comedy exposes the exploitative legacy of British colonialism in Palestine in delegitimising indigenous Arab culture and language in favour of the coloniser's. In scene 2, Lady Cunningham refers to little Souad as her "Little brown Englezee" (Masoud, 2018, p. 23). When little Souad and her father, Abu Dia, arrive at Sir Alan and Lady Cunningham's house, they are immediately put under imperial scrutiny. Lady Cunningham inquiries about the proficiency of young Souad in speaking English, a common question posed by Westerners to those from the Global South states. When she meets little Souad, she is surprised that she can speak English, an assumption that from elder Souad's inner monologue is acerbic: "Of course I speak English, you've been occupying our country for thirty years and you've made it compulsory to study at school” (Masoud, 2018, p. 14). This indirect approach, reminiscent of colonial rule, seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the established British educational system in the colony concerning the English language and the rhetoric of communication (Billig, 2005, quoted in Bhungalia, 2019, p. 388).

After having been tutored in a Western woman’s lifestyle and proper English by Lady Cunningham, Souad delves into the notion of accent as a persistent linguistic spectre, a forever haunting tongue ghost in her mouth and that of her mother’s. The comical aspect of this phenomenon is explored by little Souad: “biano, pi-ano, piano- ah, that’s better!” (Masoud, 2018, p .22), “Is this Englezee?” Humour fosters conditions for disinvestment (Bhungalia, 2019, p. 390), and the comedic effect of mispronounced words leads to a soliloquy by senior Souad on the socially ingrained ideology of homemaking and traditional gender roles with her mother. The humour emphasises the similarities between her and Lady Cunningham despite their differing privileges. Ahmed Masoud cleverly parallels little Souad’s request to sew a “Jalabiya” and Lady Cunningham’s request to sew a “Jellybean” (Masoud, 2018, pp. 20-21).

The Cunninghams are oblivious to the rich Arab culture and traditions that Souad has been nurtured in. Little Souad satirises how little Sir Alan Cunningham knows about the culture of the country colonised by them: “ Oh my God, he knew nothing” quips Little Souad, and then she laughs out loud when Sir Alan Cunningham asks, “If we spoke ‘Palestinian,’” and if Palestine was a part of Syria (Masoud, 2018, p.22) – a sharp jibe at the incompetence of European colonisers projecting their superior knowledge of cultures and civilisations to justify the white man’s burden. Souad cites instances of other ill-informed questions by Sir Cunningham: “I don’t suppose you have a glass of sherry around the house, do you?” to asking her mother “why she covered her hair” (Masoud, 2018, p. 22). In retorting, “Is this Englezee making a joke, or is he a half-wit?” (Masoud, 2018, p. 22), Souad’s mother fittingly laughs back at imperial hegemony.

Hajja Souad’s persona as little Souad and senior Souad is itself a site of resistance and steeped in culture, especially because it is a phenomenon rooted in Palestinian theatre. Nassar (2006) writes that the Palestinian woman’s representation on stage is positive and symbolic: “Mother, Sister, Wife of a Martyr, she is a symbol of Palestine, the lost land that is there to be regained” (Nassar, 2006, p.23). A woman playing the protagonist in Palestinian theatre becomes “the bearer of tragedy” and “the preserver of cultural tradition” (Nassar, 2006, p. 23). It is noteworthy how these two titles apply to little Souad and the present (older) Souad, respectively; little Souad is the “bearer of tragedy” in scene two, and the old Souad is aptly the “preserver of cultural tradition.” Masoud presents two sides to the same coin: he uses little Souad to recount scene 2 factually, but he also includes old Souad to mobilise her internal trauma in the scene. There is a balancing act between the humour of the situation and the presentation of trauma that gives meaning to that humour. Lady Cunningham’s name might not prompt humour when first encountered by the audience, but a double-take would reveal her cunning character, aptly represented in her name. The satirical nature of Souad’s monologues directly opposes the tragedy, but not in a way that diminishes its importance. On the contrary, the humour is not merely present to deflate the tragic events of Souad’s life but rather to depower them. For instance, Souad’s lines, “the constant drumming of bullets and drones and helicopters is getting on my nerves now. Let’s have some music instead . . . why don’t you bloody fuck off?” carry a distinct power of refusal (Masoud, 2018, p. 1).

2.4. Breaking the fourth wall

The audience is critical to validating the play’s traumatic revelations—a usually tertiary collective that must be implicated within the story and made complicit through subtlety. This validation of trauma through the audience comes from a willingness—on Hajja Souad’s part—

to repeat "you see" consecutively at the opening of scene 3. She begins with "you see" on the subject of Israelis not having a sense of humour, then starts again with "you see" and a hypothetical situation pitting Palestinians and Israelis in a single room (Masoud, 2018, p. 31). The repetition firmly points to Souad implicating the audience at every turn in these passages. However, she turns this into a situation where two nationalities and nations are forced into one space. The audience may also comprise many nationalities (seeing as the play was staged in 2018 in London), a diverse collective already in one room. Masoud masks a history of resentment underneath the humour, positioning the audience in the driver's seat rather than the backseat.

Rokem writes that the performance of history in contemporary theatre implicates the performer and the spectator alike. In the case of the performer/actor performing history, he emphasises that the actor on the stage also becomes a witness of the historical event. This performer-witness is able to tell the spectators something about the experiences previously hidden behind the "veils" of their past and now, through the performance, revealed to the spectators" (Rokem, 2000, p. 206). As a performer-storyteller, Hajja Souad is involved "in piecing the past together through narrative" that is closely related to the idea of performing history (2000, p. 9). In the context of Rokem's theory, Souad, as a witness, does not necessarily have to strive toward complete neutrality to make it possible for the spectators, the "bystanders" in the theatre, to become secondary witnesses, to understand and, in particular, "to form an opinion" about the forces which have shaped the accidents of history (2000, p. 9). Her role as a survivor-witness to Palestine's historical past makes it possible for the spectator to see "the past," as Rokem opines in a new way, and as I contend - to see the present and the future differently. Finally, in the performance of history, Rokem identifies the process of catharsis as a "ritual" of resurrection, a revival of past suffering, where the victim is given the power to speak about the past again. Therefore, if Souad is a victim, witness, and survivor, the audience is then just as complicit as any other character in the play in witnessing what Rokem terms the "accidents of history" (2000, p. 9). Hajja Souad is called upon at the end of *The Shroud Maker,* to fulfil the role of communicating past and present trauma - with the final two lines - being stage directions rather than dialogue.

A stark contrast to the rest of the play, Hajja Souad is physically not there at the end and has no voice to offer. *The Shroud Maker's* ending is preceded by a harrowing line from Hajja Souad to her grandson Ghassan, "follow your orders, kill everyone […] and I will make shrouds for them all" (Masoud, 2018, p. 47). Death and trauma is countered with absolute hilarity in the final line in that same passage, "I'll give you ten percent" (p. 47), which employs the exact humour Souad uses in the first scene. Dark humour is succeeded by silence, waiting for anyone other than the characters of the play—the audience—to understand the trauma and use it as a stimulus for their future actions. Hajja Souad consciously involves the audience in her trauma and the collective trauma of the nation. In scene 3, humour and trauma walk on thin ice as Souad looks around the audience for measurements for a shroud but quickly quips that she needs "a model with, well, with some flesh" (p. 31).

> HAJJA SOUAD. I'm expecting a bit of a run on
> sales so we'll need a variety of sizes . . .
> (*she starts measuring someone from the audience.*) Of course
> You can make a one-size-fits-all shroud, you
> Know, elasticated, but there's no skill involved . . .
> (*Addressing a female member of the audience.*) Now,
> You madam! Would you mind . . . actually, no,
> I need a bit more . . . up top . . . (scanning audience)
> Hmm . . . never mind, I'll have to guess.

(Masoud, 2018, p. 30-31)

In breaking the fourth wall through direct address, and in making the audience participate in the real act of helping her design shrouds for corpses, Souad makes them complicit in the war and in historical trauma.

In the play's first production in London, the role of Hajja Souad was played by Masoud's friend Justin Butcher (Masoud, 2018, p. vi). Masoud states that he asked Butcher to play the role of the female octogenarian due to a shortage of time: he had ten days to get the script on the stage (Masoud, 2018, p. vi; A, Masoud, personal communication, 14 September 2023). However, I assert that getting a man to play a woman's role is, nonetheless, a brilliant *tour de force* as it draws on the comic trope of men impersonating women in theatre to generate comedy; the visual absurdity of cross-dressing enhances the humour in the play. On a more serious note, it gravitates towards Hajja Souad's ambiguous role-playing of traditional female and male roles in one persona: she is both the nurturer and the breadwinner for her family. Further, Masoud's choice of scripting a one-actor monologue is a conscious attempt to "play on the strong Arabic tradition of storytelling; it is the same as having a Hakawati (storyteller on stage) who takes the audience on a journey using mostly text, but also some props and a lot of sound effects to transport them to an imaginative place" (Al-Jadir, 2018). The use of the female storyteller as the only actor in the play is a traditional Arab storytelling method, which reinforces "the collective identity of the spectators during the actual act of performing. As they . . . are reassured in their cultural affiliation and identity" (Nassar, 2006, p. 22). This storytelling technique, I allege, eliminates dialogue between two characters in favour of a banter between the storyteller and the audience. Masoud acknowledges this connection between the audience and the actor when Souad breaks the fourth wall, searching the audience for a model to base her shroud patterns on (Masoud, 2018, pp. 30-31). Rather than squirming in their seats like perverse spectators of Souad's tragic life, the audience connects with a Palestinian woman who controls her narrative, invites them to laugh at her situation alongside her, and on her terms.

Jawad (2014) explores how Palestinian cultural production in occupied territories is embedded within the context of performance-based politics, which "in turn shapes artists' and scholars' understanding of how aesthetic performances can function as resistance" (Jawad, 2014, p. 29). Jawad's argument heavily weighs into Masoud's use of humour to normalise suffering and resist oppression. Masoud wrote *The Shroud Maker* to celebrate the Contemporary Palestinian Culture's programme of the 70th anniversary of the 1948 Palestinian exodus, also known as the *Nakba* or the "catastrophe." In addressing a multicultural audience in London, I maintain that Masoud is using two modes of alienation: physical alienation from Palestine as a diasporic writer in London and alienation through humour. It is vital to acknowledge that the juxtaposition of conflict and humour in black comedy alienates the audience from catharsis. Instead, it affords "intellectual reflection" (Connard, 2005, p. 55). The audience is transformed into a critical thinker and becomes part of a "culture of resistance" (Jawad, 2014, p. 29).

3. **Conclusion**

The balancing act between humour and trauma is a primer for a generation of Palestinians living in Palestine and in the diaspora. Black comedy plays a vital role in creating a culture of resistance when directed against Israeli oppression and encourages critical reflection about how society is and how we want it to be. Hajja Souad's representation of cultural tragedy and her desire to implicate the audience through dark humour are ways Masoud uses to carefully weaponise Palestinian trauma. It is up to the spectators, an ethnically diverse collective, to pick up the pieces at the end of *The Shroud Maker*. There are no easy solutions in black comedy.

All is not well and usually does not end well, and Jack gets neither Jill nor the pot of gold. *The Shroud Maker* remains open-ended, deviating towards ambiguity – chaotic and tragic on the one hand and affirmative on the other. The audience realises that Hajja Souad is not a perfect figure – selfless and heroic. Instead, they connect with her as a real human being who leaves no stone unturned to make a profit out of the death around her. Her puns though painful in effect, resourcefully communicate the message of Palestinian grit in the face of calamity. Accepting tragedy does not mean subservience; it is the least expected form of cultural resistance, so it becomes a highly effective call to action and a beacon of hope.

Masoud uses black comedy to re-sensitise the audience to the legacy of violence and intergenerational trauma of the people in Palestine. He confronts the desensitisation of violence against Palestinians by evoking a reaction in the audience—laughter, followed by reflection on their laughter. He puts forth an alternative perspective and a different way of discussing the war beyond the dominant Western tragic narrative that denies a Palestinian voice. In the end, Souad disallows the Israelis and her grandson, Ghassan, the power to take her life (Masoud, 2018, p. 31). Masoud rationalises that an important reason for Souad's decision to determine her own future is her unconditional love for her grandson:

> She [Souad] doesn't want her Ghassan to be responsible for her own death. She doesn't want that guilt. She has faith in the future that when things will change, her grandson will have that guilt on his hands that he killed his grandmother. So she wants to do it herself. She relieves him from that guilt. . . which away from the politics of the conflict around her is such a strong human story and human message in a sense where you do stuff out and beyond of rationality. . . It's a sacrifice for existence: both her existence and her grandson as well.
>
> (A. Masoud, personal communication, 14 September 2023)

It is essential to question Masoud's intention in projecting Souad's suicide. Hajja Souad is repeatedly labelled as a survivor - and she is a survivor by all accounts. She survives British colonisation, the Nakba, the Six-Day War, the Intifadas, and the Gaza War and defies death. Her son, Ellian, says, "you are more of a survivor than we are, Mama" (Masoud, 2018, p. 38). Yet the play ends with the possibility that she might commit suicide on her eighty-fourth birthday: "she makes a noose from the cable and starts to put it around her neck." (Masoud, 2018, p. 48) The lack of an absolute closure deflects focus from the actual act of Souad committing suicide by using the same stage prop (the telephone and the telephone wire) she used throughout to vocalise defiance.

The absence of a climax does not give the audience the luxury of catharsis and instead provokes a few questions: What might we see in suicide being mentioned but never followed through? What does the implication of suicide do to Souad's "survivor" status? Hajja Souad is a survivor, and so is Palestine. Masoud is urging his audience in the theatre and the global audience to talk about the elephant in the room: can Palestine ever find catharsis? If Hajja Souad's defiance in the face of her impending death is a decision made out of hopelessness, it can also be a decision made to create a new beginning because, with death comes more life, as has been consistently shown in the play: "It's about her life and resistance rather than her death" (A. Masoud, personal communication, 14 September 2023). While war is no laughing matter, and irrespective of whatever stance one takes in the current politically expedient context of the 2023-24 Israel-Palestine war, laughing in the face of adversity is invaluable in coping with trauma and making life more liveable. This medium can change attitudes towards dominant narratives surrounding geopolitical issues and repudiate acts of oppression emulated discretely within an era considered the Global South.

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