

Book Review

Nouri Gana, *Melancholy Acts: Defeat and Cultural Critique in the Arab World*, Fordham University Press, 2023. 332 pp. Paperback.

Nouri Gana's *Melancholy Acts: Defeat and Cultural Critique in the Arab World* (2023) offers a compelling and sophisticated analysis of the psychoaffective condition of melancholy, tracing its complex emergence within Arab cultural production as a response to historical traumas, including the Nakba and Naksa, and continuing experiences of dispossession. Gana positions melancholy not merely as a passive or pathological state, but as a dynamic response to sociopolitical crises and a potent form of cultural critique and political resistance, and yet it is "indirect, equivocal, and opaque" (9). Furthermore, the book shifts the discourse on melancholy from a symptom of defeat to a transformative force that challenges the enduring legacies of colonialism, settler colonial Zionism, Euro-American imperialism, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism. Through this framework, Gana invites readers to reconsider how narratives of defeat and resilience shape the Arab world, offering profound insights that transcend academic discourse and engage broader socio-political concerns. The book's theoretical foundation draws on psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, philosophy, and literary criticism to explore how melancholy operates across various domains, including poetry, cinema, and political protest—and even everyday language—and through which "grief becomes grievance and solidarity becomes militant *sumūd*" (27). Gana argues that melancholy serves as a powerful force for challenging both local despotism and global imperialism, revealing its potential to not only articulate collective grief but also envision alternative futures for oppressed communities. *Melancholy Acts* is a passionate investigation into the emotional landscapes of the Arab experience, illuminating how communities process loss, resist oppression, and foster hope through cultural expressions.

In the introduction, Gana establishes a nuanced theoretical framework for examining melancholia in the Arab world. Using evocative case studies such as Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in 2010, and the literary works of figures like Ghassan Kanafani, Gana demonstrates how melancholy can become a politicized force for resistance and commitment to the continuation of the struggle for Palestinian liberation, resuscitating as he rightfully states "an infectious longing for collectivity and solidarity that is in the final analysis indissociable from the intertwined and overlapping processes of decolonial subjectivization and national liberation" (27).

Chapter 1, “Melancholy Formations: From Nakba to Naksa and Beyond,” delves deeply into the emotional and cultural dimensions of Arab melancholia in the aftermath of the Nakba (1948 Palestinian exodus) and the Naksa (1967 Six-Day War). Gana explores the concept of *iltizām* (commitment) in the context of these traumas, offering a complex analysis of cultural texts—including plays, novels, poetry, and films—that function as decolonial critiques of the political and social structures perpetuating oppression. Moving forward, Gana examines Nouri Bouzid’s *Riḥ Essed* [Man of Ashes] (1986), a film that critiques the patriarchal structures perpetuating postcolonial stagnation in Tunisia. Bouzid’s allegory of a slaughtered red rooster, for instance and as Gana argues, serves as a powerful metaphor for the broader political and social forces stifling progress, of the “filicidal tendencies of the arch-patriarch Bourguiba”. By engaging with the theoretical frameworks of Walter Benjamin and Slavoj Žižek, Gana underscores how melancholy in Arab cultural production serves as a defiant response to dominant narratives of progress, transforming despair into a space for critical engagement, fostering a sense of collective agency. The concept of “allegories of defeat,” introduced by Gana, further develops this argument, suggesting that artistic representations of loss can lead to recovery and renewal, and not devolving into a “psychopathological cult of defeatism.” He expands this analysis through a study of Bouzid’s *Ṣafāyih Dhahab* [Golden Horseshoes] (1987), which examines the sociopolitical consequences of the Naksa and the need to confront and transform the conditions that perpetuate such defeats. In his analysis of Anne Marie Jacir’s *Lamma Shoftak* [When I Saw You] (2012), Gana illustrates how cultural works depict the dispossessed, exiled, and migrant workers as engaged in an ongoing process of affective death—a reawakening to the trauma of homelessness marked by an enduring commitment to resistance, fostering the melancholic attachment to the Palestinian refugees’ right of return.

In the second chapter, “Melancholy Forms: Poetry in the Aftermath of Catastrophe,” Nouri Gana explores how Arab poets grapple with the profound emotional landscapes of loss, using poetry as a medium to express the ineffable and confront collective trauma and dislocation. Drawing on Theodor Adorno’s influential dictum, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Gana provocatively suggests that in the aftermath of catastrophic events such as the Nakba and Naksa, the act of writing poetry for Arab poets becomes ethically fraught. Moreover, he recontextualizes the Naksa as a reiteration of prior defeats, rather than a new melancholic turn, thereby highlighting the ongoing reverberations of historical trauma in contemporary cultural forms. Arab poets, however, continue to produce works from within this ethical tension, transcending normative aesthetic forms to confront historical realities. Through

insightful close readings of works by prominent poets such as Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, and Nizār Qabbānī, Gana illustrates how “poetic melancholy” is still capable of opening a transcultural and transnational space for psychosocial and geopolitical transformation. Gana’s readings of cultural texts, such as Mahmoud Darwish’s “Bitāqit Hawiya” [Identity Card] and Ghassan Kanafani’s *‘Ā'id 'ilā Haifā* [Returning to Haifa], illustrate how the schism between historical determinism and human agency becomes a fecund ground for the melancholy dispositions –by no means monolithic or homogenous– of postcolonial subjectivities in the Arab world. In Darwish’s *Memory for Forgetfulness* and *The Hesitant Homecomer* where individual sorrow and sense of loss intertwine with broader political lament, and Adonis’s *An Introduction to Arab Poetics* where he captures the existential anguish of the Arab experience, Gana argues, melancholy functions as a counter-narrative to prevailing discourses of oppression, challenging hegemonic ideologies and creating spaces for alternative understandings. Infused with theological and mythological motifs of fate and destiny, Arab poetry subverts conventional mourning practices. As Gana contends, this poetry engages in a form of expression that resists redemptive aesthetics and the dominant ideologies of progress in the postcolonial world. It articulates the collective trauma of the Palestinian people while asserting an unyielding resistance to erasure.

In the third chapter, “Enduring Left Melancholy: Recasting the Crisis of the Nasserite Intellectual,” Gana presents a sophisticated analysis of “left melancholy” within the context of Arab intellectual thought. He explores how the collapse of Arab nationalism and socialism has given rise to a pervasive sense of disillusionment and melancholia among intellectuals who once held strong faith in the transformative potential of revolutionary movements. Gana examines the ways in which writers like Sonallah Ibrahim and Abdelrahman Munif address the legacies of Nasserism and the broader decline of Arab socialism, critiquing the erosion of utopian ideals while interrogating the socio-political forces that enabled this failure. In his analysis of Ibrahim’s novels, *67* and *That Smell and Notes from Prison*, Gana argues that these works reflect a deeper engagement with the socio-political realities of post-revolutionary disillusionment with the Nasserite project and the rise of global capitalism. Similarly, Gana contends that Naguib Mahfouz’s novel *The Beggar* (2000) challenges the dynamics of reactionary melancholia, manic optimism, and the disavowal of an unresolved revolutionary past, critiquing the fetishization of ideologies or material objects that might serve to mitigate the painful reality of political stagnation, thus positioning the novel as an act of resistance to the compliance and complicity that marked the post-1952 Egyptian context. By confronting the enduring legacy of unfulfilled revolutionary promises,

Mahfouz's work, Gana asserts, seizes "left melancholia away from the psychodynamics of disavowal and fetishism" into "an empowering and visionary novel" (153).

In Chapter 4, "Melancholy Manhood: Modernity and Neopatriarchy in Tunisian Cinema," Nouri Gana provides a nuanced examination of the intersections between gender, modernity, and national identity in postcolonial Tunisian cinema. By analyzing films by directors such as Nouri Bouzid and Moufida Tlatli, Gana demonstrates how melancholy functions as a critical lens through which these filmmakers interrogate the evolving roles of masculinity and patriarchy structures within a society transitioning between tradition and modernity, particularly with regard to gender. Central to Gana's analysis is Bouzid's *Rih Essed* (1986), which portrays defeated male characters whose melancholic condition reflects the crisis of masculinity in postcolonial Tunisia. Gana suggests that the film presents men as victims of their own masculinity, drawing attention to the historical injustices that contribute to this melancholic state. This analysis allows Gana to explore how the film invites viewers to confront their own complicity in perpetuating these systems of power, while also reflecting the broader postcolonial dilemma—caught between the unfulfilled promises of modernity and the enduring weight of colonial and patriarchal histories. Similarly, Gana's reading of Tlatli's *The Silences of the Palace* (1994) reveals the film's melancholic undercurrents as a critique of the persistent patriarchy within Tunisian society. By depicting the lived experiences of women within a deeply patriarchal framework, Tlatli's film highlights the disjunction between legal reforms and the socio-cultural realities that women continue to face. Gana further differentiates between two types of melancholic narratives in Tunisian cinema: "melancholite," which expresses a nostalgic longing for patriarchal values, and "melancholic," which engages with personal and collective traumas. This distinction enables Gana to show how Tunisian filmmakers, through their complex portrayals of masculinity and femininity, engage with both historical and contemporary issues, exposing the contradictions inherent in postcolonial Tunisian identity. The chapter also examines films such as Nadia Fares's *Miel et cendres* [Honey and Ashes] (1996), which critiques the myth of patriarchal invulnerability. Fares's portrayal of male violence against women underscores the material and psychological costs of patriarchal power, illuminating the intersecting forms of gendered violence that persist in Tunisian society.

In Chapter 5, "Melancholy Ends: Palestinian Film and Narrative Martyrdom," Nouri Gana provides a sophisticated exploration of martyrdom in Palestinian cinema, highlighting how melancholic sensibilities shape narratives of resistance and sacrifice. By examining the tension between individual and

collective experiences of loss, grief, and resistance, Gana offers critical insights into the dynamics of cultural production under occupation. His analysis of films by directors such as Elia Suleiman, Hany Abu-Assad, and Annemarie Jacir underscores how Palestinian cinema reflects complex layers of identity, historical trauma, and the ongoing struggle for self-determination. Gana begins his analysis with Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002), a film that blends humor and irony to navigate the fragile boundaries between hope and despair, resistance and resignation. The melancholic tone of the film critiques both external and internal forms of oppression, exposing the absurdities of the Palestinian condition. Gana argues that the film transcends the typical narratives of victimhood, offering alternative visions of Palestinian identity and agency that challenge both the political and social limitations imposed by the occupation. Turning to Hany Abu-Assad's *Paradise Now* (2005), Gana delves into the psychological and emotional struggles of two young men preparing for a suicide mission. The film's exploration of martyrdom is imbued with melancholy, capturing the existential crises facing Palestinians in the context of ongoing violence, dispossession, and despair. Gana contends that the film's melancholic undertones prompt viewers to reflect on the deeper socio-political and emotional dimensions of martyrdom, framing it as both an act of sacrifice and a paradoxical response to the perceived impossibility of liberation. He argues that, while film is often bound to the spectacle of entertainment, it can transcend its consumable nature to engage with historical truth. Through their critical engagement with the complexities of lived experience under occupation, films such as *Paradise Now* foster political consciousness and dissidence. Gana explores how martyrdom operations, while framed as acts of defiance, also embody the impossibility of liberation without first confronting the deep emotional and existential scars of occupation. Furthermore, Gana contends that the film's minimalist thriller genre and use of humor disrupt the commodified spectacle of martyrdom, offering a more nuanced portrayal as a complex act that critiques and affirms the larger narrative of occupation, urging viewers to confront the ethical implications of violence under conditions of extreme oppression. Ultimately, Gana positions Palestinian cinema as a critical cultural text that navigates the intersections of resistance, spectacle, and historical truth.

In the final chapter, "Melancholy Islam: Jihad, Jouissance, and Female Clairvoyance," Nouri Gana offers a pioneering examination of the intersections between melancholy, Islamic discourse, and gender. His analysis skillfully interrogates how contemporary Arab writers and filmmakers engage with themes of jihad, jouissance (pleasure), and female clairvoyance, using these motifs to critically reimagine Islamic identities and practices. A philosophical turn in Gana's analysis brings him to the concept of a "return to origins" within

Islamist movements, drawing on the Lacanian psychoanalysis of Tunisian scholar Fethi Benslama who argues that Islamist ideologies are grounded in a nostalgic and melancholic longing for a pure, pre-colonial origin, a “wounded Islamic ideal”. Gana critically engages with Benslama’s assertions, particularly his claim that Islamism arises from the trauma of colonial modernity, and questions whether it represents a response to secular colonialism rather than a radical departure from it. While Benslama’s psychoanalytic reading provides valuable insights into the melancholic attachment to an idealized past, as his melancholic gesture is more recuperative than essentialist, Gana contends that it overlooks the complexity of melancholia, particularly the intertwining of loss and desire. He suggests that a more nuanced understanding of melancholy, through a psychoanalytic lens that incorporates the concept of *jouissance*, would offer a richer analysis of the psychological and cultural dynamics within Islamic identity and religious movements. While Gana acknowledges the limitations of Benslama’s approach, he also emphasizes the potential for psychoanalysis to challenge Eurocentric narratives and engage with non-Western religious traditions.

In the epilogue, Nouri Gana offers a nuanced synthesis of the key themes and theoretical frameworks that pervade the book, presenting a compelling articulation of what he terms “melancholy critique.” This concept, as Gana elaborates, serves as a transformative critical lens through which Arab cultural production and political engagement are re-evaluated. He argues that melancholy critique occupies a distinct position in navigating the ideological impasse between nativism and cosmopolitanism, offering a sophisticated framework for understanding Arab cultural and political dynamics that transcends both essentialist and universalist approaches. While he acknowledges the inherent risks and limitations of melancholy, the dual nature of melancholy—as both affliction and a vehicle for critique—reflects the interdisciplinary approach Gana employs throughout the book.

Nouri Gana’s *Melancholy Acts: Defeat and Cultural Critique in the Arab World* offers a profound and innovative examination of the emotional and political complexities shaping the Arab world. Through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates psychoanalytic theory, postcolonial critique, and cultural analysis, Gana reframes melancholy—traditionally viewed as passive or regressive—as a dynamic force with the potential to drive political and cultural transformation. The book combines macro-historical analysis with detailed textual readings of literature, film, and art, providing both broad socio-political insights and nuanced examinations of specific cultural works. Gana’s engagement with psychoanalytic theory, especially the works of Freud and Lacan, is another compelling aspect of the book. Rather than applying these

Western frameworks uncritically, Gana adapts and reinterprets them through the lens of Arab historical and cultural realities. This nuanced approach allows him to reconcile universal psychological processes with culturally specific understandings of melancholy, avoiding theoretical universalism while providing a rich, multifaceted analysis. The book also deepens its contribution by exploring gender dynamics, examining how melancholy intersects with constructions of masculinity and femininity in the Arab world, and highlighting how both men and women engage with loss, trauma, and resistance in distinct ways. While the book's theoretical sophistication may present challenges for readers unfamiliar with psychoanalytic or postcolonial theory, Gana's work remains groundbreaking. It serves as a foundational text for scholars of Arab studies, psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and cultural criticism. By combining rigorous theoretical analysis with close readings of cultural texts, *Melancholy Acts* offers a fresh perspective on the role of melancholy in Arab cultural and political life, challenging traditional notions of melancholic passivity and offering new ways of thinking about the intersections of affect, culture, and politics in the Arab world, towards, as he beautifully concludes, a decolonial project of emancipation.

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