

MUBBIRA (Omer Ben-David &amp; A-WA) A-WA, 2019

## PORTABLE HOMELANDS AND WANDERING WOMEN A-WA'S CONCEPT ALBUM 'BAYTI FI RASI'

Alexa Altmann

The jingling of goat bells, an animal cry and diffuse sounds of vehicles, sea gulls and snippets of human conversation; only then, the chanting begins: *"land of wheat and barley, grape and olive. Fig and pomegranate, of date and home"*. The three voices are synchronized to perfection: crystal clear high pitches at times bordering subtly on the irritating. The lines are borrowed from the Torah book *d'varim* (Deuteronomy) and describe the seven species which symbolize the bounty and blessing of the biblical land of Israel. In the Israeli sister-trio A-WA's interpretation, however, the promising words are chanted in Arabic with lingering trilled r's and, as the electronic beat finally settles in, A-WA sing and rap of flight and displacement *"where will I stake my home? You have a tent for now"* of readjustment and loss *"and I will learn the language, lose the accent"* and of alienation and rejection *"I came to you fleeing, you saw me as primitive"*.

The song *Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman* (Here is not Yemen) is the second music video release from A-WA's 2019 concept album *Bayti Fi Rasi* (My home is in my head) which the sisters dedicated to their paternal great-grandmother, Rachel, whose 1949 journey from Yemen to Israel as a single-mother is recounted in fourteen songs, which seemingly flow into each other with repeating verses and sounds. They tell of hardship and destitution over the surprisingly upbeat sonic landscape of *Ya Watani* (My Homeland) which initially narrates the loss of home *"I will take the hunger [...], my total despair"*, then pairs it with resilience *"I will take my mother's language, the strength within me"* and finally proclaims the formidable fluidness of belonging as portable homeland *"I will take my home"*.

Just as A-WA's critically acclaimed, first studio album *Habib Galbi* (Love of my Heart) explored Jewish-Yemini women's oral traditions, *Bayti Fi Rasi* sounds female empowerment through the challenges and shifting gender relations brought about by forced mobility and migration. Faced with poverty and pressures of assimilating into a newly formulated Israeliness, *olim* (lit. those who ascent), Jewish immigrants, were not only expected to shed their various languages for the project of a unifying monolingualism but to abandon their diasporic cultural particularities for the sake of a reimagined nationalized sense of selfhood. While A-WA's choice to recount their female ancestors' stories of loss and relocation in their native Arabic dialect is in itself an act of reimagination of lost continuity, as I have developed **ELSEWHERE**, their focus on the specificity of the gendered experiences of family and role renegotiation in the wake of flight and migration are a key theme of their newest work. Wandering and wondering women are present in all songs: restless, unlucky but with ironic spite as in *Mubbira* (Unlucky One) *"I can't stay in one place [...] men come and go [...] my first was arranged and smelled foul, the second pinched like an old shoe, and the third? Who knows?"*. Accusatory and assertive in alternately clipped and sensual vocal delivery as in *Min Tiht Al Firash* (Underneath the Rug): *"I've taken the children, you're left with the shit, I was a mute by your side, now I am singing"*. Unsafe and alone but also



LISTEN TO AUDIO VERSION



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My first was arranged and smelled foul

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curious and with a sense of wonder as the contrasting songs *Malhuga* (Haunted) “Haven’t gotten any rest since I arrived, with neither a friend nor acquaintance, I sleep with one eye open” and *Al Asad* (The Lion) “I’m not alone tonight, I’m trespassing tonight; and here he is, standing guard” attest to. Or triumphant and rebellious as in the title track *Bayti Fi Rasi* which celebrates the migrant woman with marching drum beat and distorted keyboard and vocals and demands: “What is home? You tell me! [...] I am woman, I am man, I am journey. What is family? You tell me! At times I am man, and times I am woman; a mother and father to my little girl.”

Far from the common portrayal of migrant women as passive, oppressed or simply invisible, A-WA reinscribe their women ancestors into discourses on gender, family and migrancy with resounding voices and multifaceted sonic interventions. Throughout enjoyable and feverishly



A-WA: NPR MUSIC TINY DESK CONCERT (Bob Boilen, Morgan Noelle Smith), NPR Music, 2019

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danceable, A-WA’s music has attracted trans-local and diverse listenerships, which also include large (post)migrant audiences of origins in the MENA region, as my fieldwork at live concerts in Berlin can attest to. As a space of temporary utopia, the concert hall therefore allows for and facilitates shared experiences and negotiations of (be)longing and home(lessness) beyond nationalized and ethnicized divides.

Just as the chanted Torah verse in *Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman* is deliberately ambivalent as to the whereabouts of the magical and longed for place in the ambiguous geographies of migrant experience, which collapse the binary trajectory of ‘home’ and ‘exile’, A-WA’s songs tell (her)stories which encompass, acknowledge and embrace equally loss and reinvention, despair and resilience.

A-WA ARE THE SISTERS TAGEL, TAIR AND LIRON HAIM WHO ROSE TO SUDDEN INTERNATIONAL FAME WITH THEIR FIRST MUSICVIDEO SINGLE ‘HABIB GALBI’ IN 2015, WHICH COMBINED JEWISH-YEMENI FOLK TRADITIONS WITH ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC AND HIP-HOP BEATS. ‘BAYTI FI RASI’ (2019) IS THEIR SECOND STUDIO ALBUM.

### About the Author:

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