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GHADA ALATRASH, IMAGES BY MARYA ZARIF

Diary of Losing a Breast and Reflections on Mothering as an Arab

Drawing on scholarship in feminist studies, sociolinguistics, and cultural studies, this article-diary argues that motherhood—particularly as experienced by an Arab woman navigating personal loss, specifically the loss of a breast to cancer, and societal expectations—is not a static role but a dynamic practice shaped by cultural, linguistic, and feminist frameworks. This article explores how motherhood is a site of resistance and transformation against patriarchal norms by weaving together personal narratives and theoretical insights. It critically examines the limitations of language—specifically in Arabic, where the word "mother" is predominantly used as a noun—and advocates for reimagining and rethinking maternal roles as active and evolving practices. Through reflections on breast cancer, and the care exchanged between a mother and her mothering daughter, this piece positions the maternal as inherently political, thereby challenging conventional narratives of femininity and identity. Ultimately, it asserts that caregiving, loss, and resilience are acts of agency that redefine the self and resist the broader constraints imposed by patriarchal structures.

Introduction

This personal narrative situates itself within the existing literature by intertwining lived experiences with multiple theoretical perspectives, shedding light on the complex interplay between cultural expectations, language, and maternal agency. It examines how linguistic constraints and societal norms often shape and constrain the roles and identities of Arab mothers. Additionally, by reflecting on personal challenges, such as navigating the expectations of breastfeeding and confronting a breast cancer diagnosis, this article-diary underscores the resilience and agency inherent in maternal practices. Through this synthesis of personal narrative and scholarly discourse, I seek to contribute to understanding motherhood in Arab contexts while adding to broader feminist and sociolinguistic conversations about gender, language, and identity.

On Breasts

In June of 2023, I was invited by Professor Mairi McDermott from the University of Calgary to take part in a Mother-Scholars project, one that is built on the "belief that mothers are central to who/what we become—whether it's the stories they tell us, the traumas they pass on, the love and food through which they nourish us (or not), and so on" (IAMAS). I found myself in "a gathering … a network by which politically motivated women … think together carefully and critically about the structures that are actively shaping our lives" (Singh 129). This space, or what we came to call our coven, held many incredible mother-scholars; in our gatherings, we read the writings of several mother-scholars, including Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Indigenous scientist and mother. Given my focus on my breasts, as well as my own experience with breastfeeding, I found Kimmerer's passage on breastfeeding deeply soul-quenching and compelling:

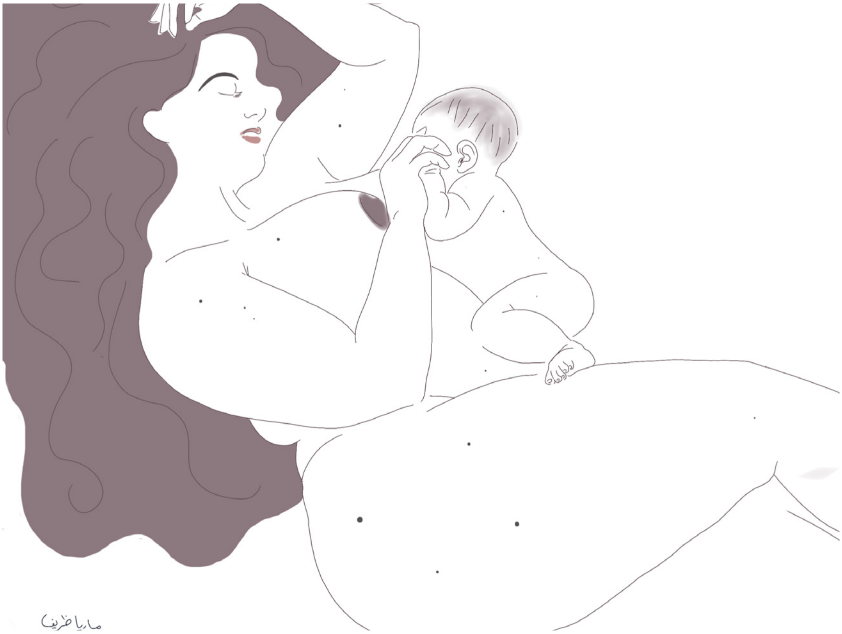
> I remember my babies at the breast, the first feeding, the long deep suck that drew up from my innermost well, which was filled and filled again, by the look that passed between us, the reciprocity of mother and child. I supposed I should welcome the freedom from all that feeding and worrying, but I'll miss it. Maybe not the laundry, but the immediacy of those looks, the presence of our reciprocal love is hard to say good-bye to. (99)

Kimmerer's reflection highlights the intricate interplay and interconnectedness shaping a mother's identity and resonates intensely with my breastfeeding experience. I breastfed my three children, Selma, Aamer, and Marcel, for seven and a half years in total; my middle child, Aamer, was not quenched until after three and a half years of breastfeeding. Admittedly, I am not sure that I can say he was quenched. However, under pressure from those around me, including his father (who happens to be a physician), I was persuaded to wean him. My breasts were as angry as he was at this terminal decision; they swelled, turned a resentful red, and ached to the point that breathing became painful. They leaked for days on end. Even the touch of the blouse I wore was excruciating. Their only relief was to be stroked by Aamer's lips—a choice no longer possible. Within a week, my breasts, once like a gushing river, became completely dry as did Aamer's baby tears.

Throughout my journey of motherhood and breastfeeding, I understood from several of my family members who happen to be medical practitioners that breastfeeding helps lower the chances of breast cancer. This assurance was so firmly embedded in my consciousness that the last news I ever expected was a diagnosis of breast cancer. On December 1, 2023, a biopsy revealed that I had stage-one breast cancer. Today, I love my breasts more than I ever did before, the way that a mother loves her sick child, but since my diagnosis six months ago, I have had to let go of one of them. I am grateful for all it has given me of femininity and life, for me and my children.

Those close to me know that I have always been obsessed with breasts. A couple of years ago, I took out an expensive loan so that I could have a breast lift after having breastfed for seven years. In my first attempt at writing, I began my short stories with a story about a Syrian woman named Zahra: "Naked, she stood across from the mirror admiring her breasts. They were perfectly round, swollen like two pomegranates. No man [or woman or person, I would have added today] had ever touched or felt their perfection. 'What a pity,' she lamented!" (Alatrash, *Stripped* 13). A line from Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish that I have always loved to recite on stage, with a consciously erotic note, is: "We have on this earth what makes life worth living . . . a woman leaving her forties with her apricots fully ripened" (my translation; Darwish 181). On April 16, 2024, I turned fifty, and as a woman who has just left her forties, I can relate to the comparison of breasts to ripened apricots and the intoxicatingly lingering sweetness they leave behind.

Reciting Darwish's line on breasts was one of how I put to practice the "uses of the erotic," as Audre Lorde teaches, where the erotic becomes power—we tap into that feminine power we possess as women to become empowered. As Lorde reminds us, "Of course, women so empowered are dangerous" (55). Indeed, my breasts have been one of the wells from which the erotic continues to flood and pour, where the erotic becomes that "most profoundly creative source … female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (Lorde 59).



“The Milky Way”

On Selma

After having had surgery on February 20, 2024, and reflecting on the aftermath of having lost a breast, I consider March 4, 1998, the most beautiful and blessed day of my life—the day I became Selma’s mother, and she became my daughter.

Ever since my diagnosis, Selma did not leave my side; she nursed me through the long blurry, narcotized days and, like a candle, lit up my nights. My daughter turned twenty-six a few days after my mastectomy, and she began as a resident in psychiatry in July 2024. Selma had always been the one member in our family who loves her sleep most, notorious for sleeping through tens of alarms (with tones like fire-truck sirens) every morning. But ever since my mastectomy, this changed. She became vigilant, always on high and constant alert, and awoke to the slightest change of rhythm in my breathing at night. She was up on her feet in the early morning hours, answering the alarm’s calls to administer the next dose of antibiotics. She lovingly oversaw my breakfast, lunch, and dinner, ensuring I had the nutrition needed for a swift recovery. She changed the dressing of my wound every morning while swallowing a squeamishness that originally kept her from choosing surgery as a career. It was as if the maternal suddenly and naturally kicked in as she mothered her mother. Somehow, she knew what to do—how to mother—and how to put to practice knowledge stored in an inventory, a history, memories of a twenty-six-year mother-daughter relationship. In retrospect, I, too, had no experience in mothering or motherhood as Selma came into my life. Nonetheless, whether maternally inherent or a learned and internalized skill, Selma became no less of a mother to me than I had been to her.

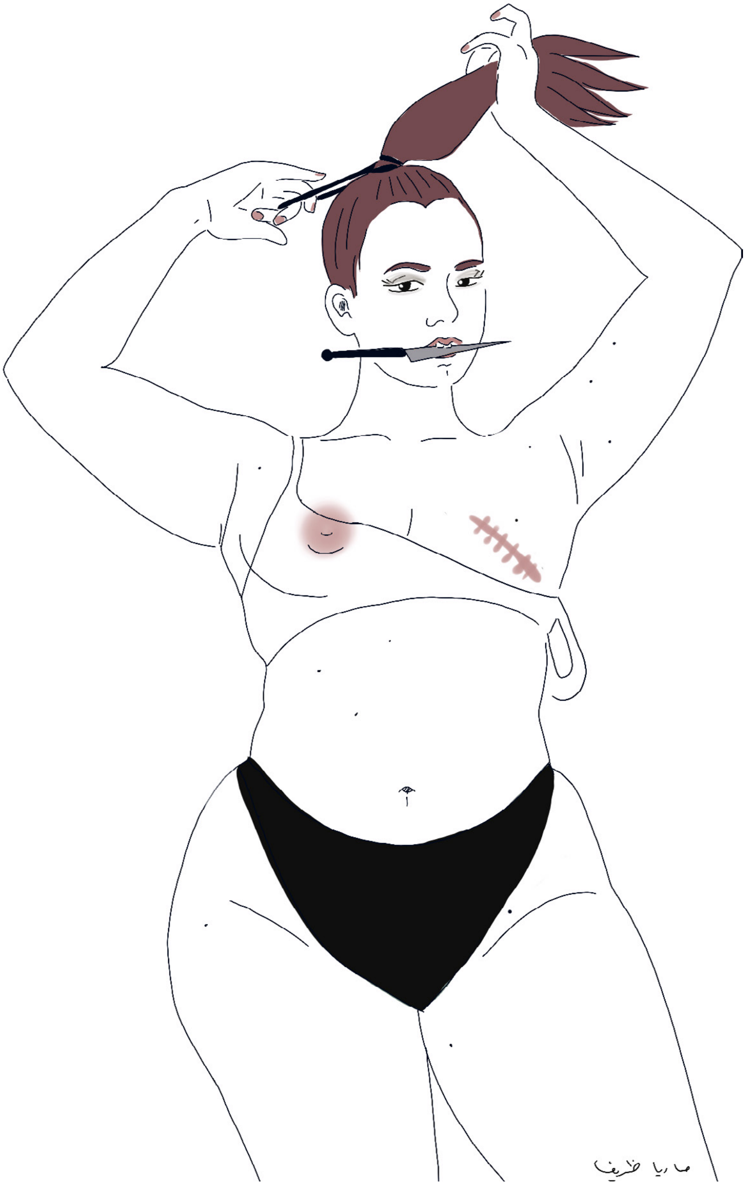
In *The Breaks* (another work that we read in our mother-scholar gathering), Juliette Singh describes the aftermath of an emergency neuro-surgery she underwent as a "bodily break" and a memory with an enduring imprint on her daughter—a memory of a mother "losing her stoicism, becoming desperate and fearful and eventually warping under pain and debility" and of a memory of a "mother losing her capacity to mother" (30). In a letter to her daughter, Singh writes: "My most intimate desire is that you find a way to break with me rather than to break from me…. I yearn for our imminent break to be not an end, but an act of profound and collective renewal. In these early years of your life, I whisper to you a mantra in your sleep with the passionate hope that it will embolden you: Break with me, break with me, break with me" (29). Like Singh, in the aftermath of my mastectomy, I, too, broke, and Selma broke with me, and "in the breaking, it seemed that we were coming closer together, our bodies moving toward each other, both holding the crisis as one" (Singh 39). In the wake of a unilateral mastectomy of the right breast, I experienced a "bodily break," where my ability to use my right arm and hand became limited—mind you, I have never been as grateful as I am today for the ability of my left hand which has spared me the indignity of not being able to pull up my underwear in the bathroom. Likewise, I have never appreciated my right hand as much as I do today; I am acutely cognizant of the faithful services it has rendered throughout my fifty years of life, half a century of services. But the simplest, most routine and taken-for-granted acts—like standing under the shower and raising my arm to wash and rinse my hair—became impossible. For weeks, I could not shower; instead, I had to soak the lower part of my body in the bathtub and then call for Selma to help wash my hair.

She would first scrub my shoulder, back, and remaining healthy breast and then use a soapy towel to clean around the lost breast with the utmost care, guarding against water nearing the raw incision where infection loomed threatening over my implant, which I did eventually lose but for different unfortunate and unnecessary reasons (see Alatrash, "I Almost Lost My Life"). Before washing my hair, she would drape a black garbage bag around my neck with graceful skill, shielding my body and wound from water. This ritual became an exercise in humility, a practice in patience akin to swallowing a bitter pill, for my pride, laced with resistance, deepened the agony, adding layers of pain and suffering to an already excruciating ordeal, both physically and mentally.

Before stepping in the bathtub, I would confess to my daughter that I was in a bitchy mood, my spirit fraught with storms, wrestling with pride's hold. Without fail, she would gently reply, "It's okay, mama. I love you"—words that unfailingly dissolved my frustration and reminded me of a generous fate that gifted her as my daughter. The Holy Quran teaches:

> وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا ۚ إِمَّا يَبْلُغَنَّ عِندَكَ الْكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَا أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا
> فَلَا تَقُل لَّهُمَا أُفٍّ وَلَا تَنْهَرْهُمَا وَقُل لَّهُمَا قَوْلًا كَرِيمًا
>
> وَاخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذُّلِّ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ وَقُل رَّبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا ؕ
>
> [الإسراء:23 / 24]
>
> And your Lord has decreed: Do not worship any but Him; [and] Be good to your parents; and should both or any one of them attain old age with you, do not say to them even "fie" neither chide them, but speak to them with respect. And be humble and tender to them and say: "Lord, show mercy to them as they nurtured me when I was small." (17:23–24)

During a particularly long and painful night, as Selma handed me my pain medication, this verse came to mind. I recited it to her as a promise of good tidings that are to come her way. The Prophet Mohammad also speaks about mothers in his Hadith and teaches, "Be good to your mother; Paradise is under her feet" (Hadith 20). And, when asked, "O Messenger of Allah! Who is most deserving of my fine treatment?" he answers, "Your mother, then your mother, then your mother, then your father, then your nearest" (Hadith 316). I do not claim to be religious; perhaps a more fitting term is spiritual. Yet, as a daughter, I once internalized these words as though they had been inscribed by the hands of God. Today, I see these words endure in my daughter's essence and actions, beautifully realized—Selma, the culmination of my journey through motherhood, and a daughter so tender to her mother.



“The Queen of Spades”

The Word "Mother" in Arabic Is Used Predominantly as a Noun and Not a Verb

When Selma was ten years of age, I dedicated a poem to her:

"Selma"
Someone once asked,
"What would you wish for your daughter?"
My thoughts paced back and forth
North and South, East and West,
up mountains and down valleys,
and I found no better wish
than to wish my daughter a daughter, just like her.
Someone who can be her fragrance of flowers in the arid seasons,
Her dew at dawn,
her lavender,
her cardamom tea and her BC wine,
her jasmines and her tulips,
her Mediterranean olive trees and evergreen pines,
Her East and West,
her delicate shawl on a cold night,
her salt and sugar,
her heaven and skies,
her unreached horizons,
her summer breeze,
her sublime,
her silence and what cannot be said in words,
her eyesight,
her butterflies,
her earth,
her sun and stars,
her rain,
the light of the moon,
Someone who can be her poem.
I wish for my Selma.… another Selma.

Today, sixteen years later, I would add another line: "I also wish for Selma, in her weary days, a daughter to mother her."

Working as a translator from Arabic to English, I'm often struck by how rich the Arabic language is—its lexicon is said to exceed twelve million words, and it is spoken by over 422 million people (native and non-native) (Hakem 39). Yet ever since I began to write about mothers, mothering, and motherhood, it struck me that the Arabic word for mother, "Umm" (أُمّ), is primarily used as a noun, with only rare instances of it being used as a verb—particularly in classical poetry. The *Lisān al-ʿArab* dictionary offers one such rare example of "mother" used as a verb, stating:

وأَمَّتْ تَؤُمُّ أُمُومَةً :صارت أُمّاً

وقال ابن الأعرابي في امرأة ذكرها :كانت لها عمة تَؤُمها أي تكون لها كالأُمِّ

The above lines can be translated as follows: "ʻammat, ta'umm, umūmah, meaning she became a mother/she mothers/mothering. And Ibn al-Aʿrābī mentioned a woman, saying: "She had an aunt *ta'ummuha*, meaning who mothers her/was like a mother to her" (my translation; *Lisān al-ʿArab* 575).

However, in English, "mother" naturally serves as both noun and verb: a mother; to mother—a fluid duality. Singh writes about words and how they carry "histories that require attentiveness and sensitivity" (147), and in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Kimmerer tells us, "Language is the dwelling place of ideas that do not exist anywhere else. It is a prism through which to see the world" (258). bell hooks also writes on words and language: "We are rooted in language, wedded, have our beings in words" (28).

In her article "The Word 'Mother' Is a Verb," Julietta Brennock writes:

> "Mother" is a verb. Mother is holding his head over the toilet while he throws up too much Halloween candy. Mother is picking her up from the principal's office after she made disrespectful comments to her teacher while standing up for herself. Mother is taking away his phone when his grades fell below Cs and standing tall as he slams the bedroom door in your face. Mother is putting her behind the wheel of your beloved car to teach her to drive and staying up with him all night when his heart is broken. "Mother" and "father" and "parent" are words of sustained care over time, not a moment of biological occurrence. It is knowing every detail of your person because you are doing the singular thing that is actually required to be a "real" parent: You are there. (223)

As a mother, an Arab, and a translator—and conscious of how language is situated in patriarchal and sociocultural histories—I find it ever more important to reengage and reactivate "mother" as a verb in Arabic. According to *Merriam-Webster*, verbs "show an action, occurrence, or state of being." I suggest that using "mother" as a verb in Arabic reimagines and rethinks maternal roles as actively evolving, as action, and as lifelong service—an eternal contract and a position that requires that we are "always there" (Brennock 223), 24/7, 365 days a year. Today, I turn to "mother" in its verb form, in both languages, to describe and honour Selma's actions in the last few months as an act of mothering, for Selma indeed mothered me like a mother mothers her sick child.

As a schoolgirl in Arabic language classes, I was expected to recite a poem from start to finish just as I would memorize a surah from the Quran. A passage etched in my memory—sacred as scripture—comes from the work of Egyptian poet Hafiz Ibrahim (also known as the Poet of the People), where he writes: A mother is a school; if you prepare her, you prepare a nation of a strong foundation / A mother is a garden; if watered, she blossoms in the most splendid of blooms / A mother is the teacher of all teachers whose achievements are far-reaching into the horizons" (my translation; 282). Today, as I read these words through the lens of a mother, I am struck by how the poet's use of nouns and adjectives—a school, a garden, a teacher—to depict mothers fails to evoke even one verb to speak of their actions. As I position myself as an Arab feminist-mothering-mother, and as I revisit the once-romanticized lines of the poet through a lens of feminist thinking, I cannot help but smell the stench of masculinity reeking from every word in the poet's lines and feel the acuteness of an objectification of our roles as mothers—one that does not translate into subjects of action. I question and resist how words, language, poems, and histories have come to contribute to the patriarchal construction of an Arabic inventory on motherhood. Rethinking these cultural and linguistic frameworks from a feminist perspective reveals the entrenched patriarchy that shapes and limits the narrative around maternal roles.

On Being a Killjoy as Umm Selma

Revisiting a broader feminist framework, I find Sara Ahmed's concept of the "feminist killjoy" especially relevant. It describes individuals who unsettle complacent social norms by challenging oppressive structures and voicing uncomfortable truths. In my role as an Arab mother, this "killjoy" identity manifested through resisting patriarchal expectations and insisting on my agency against entrenched gender hierarchies. These deeply rooted gender hierarchies are further perpetuated and reinforced through linguistic conventions, which not only reflect but also actively sustain patriarchal dominance. In Arabic, the word mother (in its noun form) is Umm (أم) and the word father is Ab (أب), and it is customary in many Arab countries to call parents fathers or mothers of their firstborn son, not daughter. Many times, this nickname comes to replace the parent's name socially among family and friends. However, in my case, my firstborn was a daughter, Selma. This presented a dilemma: Selma was not a firstborn son, and to my surprise, my husband's name became Abu (father of) Aamer, and I automatically became Umm (mother of) Aamer, not Umm Selma, years before Aamer was born.

Indeed, the nickname Abu Aamer was assigned to my husband ever since his teenage years, and I, as his wife, then became Umm Aamer. Aside from the problem of my son's name having been decided by some random guy years before I gave birth to him, I was appalled at the notion of dismissing and diminishing my daughter's place in a hierarchy that values a male son, accords him a place of domination, and privileges him in societal structures before even having taken his first breath of life—a sociocultural hierarchy that shapes and positions a female body and her presence in the world, society, and family as second in line to the male figure in her life, be it her father, brother, or husband.

This is a hierarchy of institutional structures that "impose values, modes of thought, ways of being on our consciousness" (hooks 37)—a hierarchy of gendered power allocations where, as explained by Fatima Mernissi, the issue with Muslim (and I add and/or Arab) societies "is not an ideology of female inferiority, but rather a set of laws and customs that ensure that women's status remains one of subjugation" (11). She adds:

> Paradoxically, and contrary to what is commonly assumed, Islam does not advance the thesis of women's inherent inferiority. Quite the contrary, it affirms the potential equality between the sexes. The existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women's inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power: namely, segregation and legal subordination in the family structure. (19)

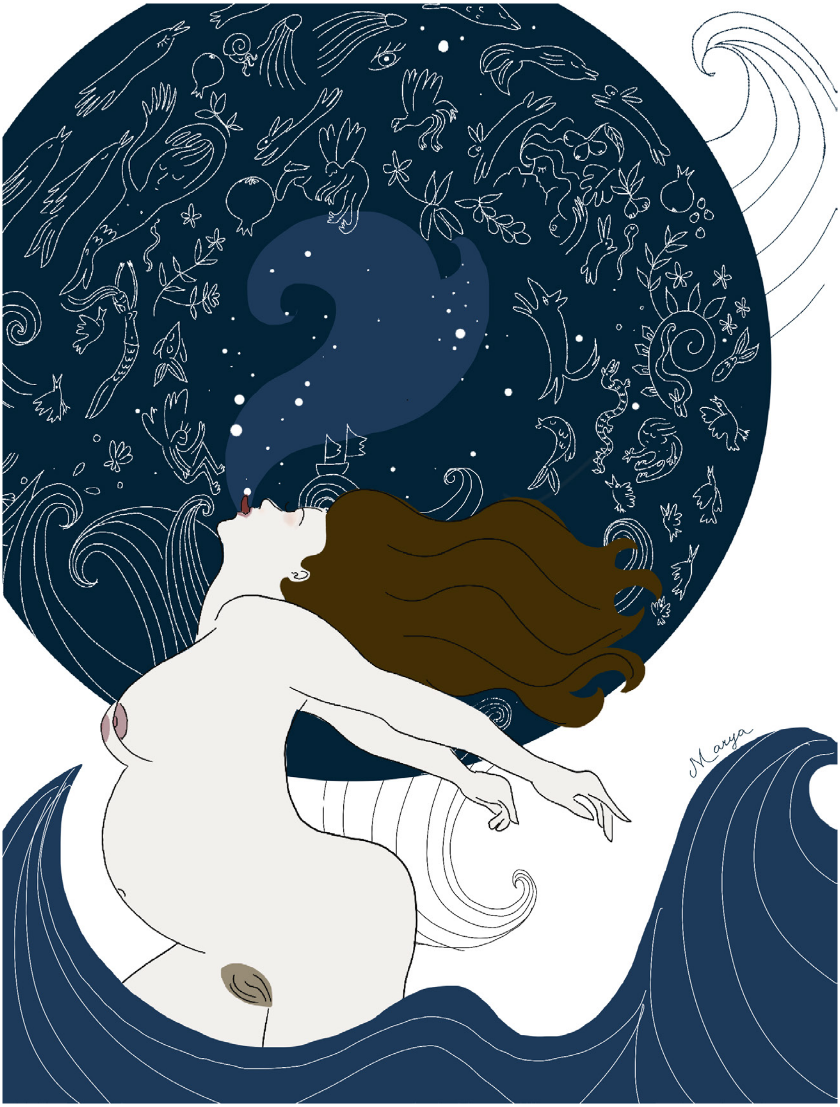
This hierarchy, as Ahmed puts it in her "A Killjoy Manifesto," embodies "the violence of a patriarchal order" (251).

As a new mother in 1998, this was my first encounter with a patriarchally constructed motherhood, and it made me sick, as Ahmed might say. However, I have also learned from Ahmed that it is "our rage [that] becomes our sickness. We vomit; we vomit out what we have been asked to take in. Our guts become our feminist friends the more we are sickened. We begin to feel the weight of histories more and more" (255). In retrospect, that was when I had unknowingly stepped into the role of a "feminist killjoy"; it was my moment of "coming to voice—on moving from silence into speech as revolutionary gesture," the beginning of my "self-transformation" when I was "transformed in consciousness and being" (hooks 12, 15). It was the first time that I heard my voice.

Andrea O'Reilly emphasizes the importance of matricentric feminism, which focusses on empowering mothering and directly challenging the oppressive nature of patriarchal motherhood and its construction. She maintains, "I have sought to do feminism as a mother and do mothering as a feminist" (26). In an attempt to follow in O'Reilly's footsteps and disrupt a patriarchal system as a feminist-mothering-mother—to reject violations, decentre the patriarch, the male, and the masculine, and break away from the "capture of normativity" (Singh 46)—I decided to demand that I be called Umm Selma.

I also refused to give my daughter her father's first name as her middle name—another tradition practiced in some Arab countries that emphasizes centring a daughter's gender identity around the patriarchal and the masculine. Instead, on my daughter's passport, her name reads today as Selma Alatrash Janbey, where my last name became her middle name. My sons' names read as Aamer Alatrash Janbey and Marcel Alatrash Janbey. These happen to be some of the most triumphant moments I lived in life as a feminist killjoy, wherein a feminist killjoy refers to those who feel discomfort with the status quo in society and "speak up" and "speak back" in the face of racism, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression while actively refusing to conform to societal expectations that hold inequality (Ahmed 260). This is how I was living a feminist life. Feminism becomes praxis. As Ahmed says, "We enact the world we are aiming for. Nothing less will do" (255).

On March 4, 1998, I became Umm Selma, a crown I wear on my head, as we say in Arabic, and it was also then that I became a warrior in a campaign against patriarchal and gendered hierarchical sociocultural constructions and institutions. Today, I engage mothering as an "unabashedly" (Singh 74) political act, where parenting becomes "an act of radical pedagogy" (63) and where my beliefs have become my "living politics" (57). As Singh resolves: "There was no maternal without the political, no way of being a mother that didn't involve an urgent and planetary pedagogy. To be a mother meant to diagnose wounds and figure out how to mend them. There was little difference whether these wounds were to be found on individual bodies or within the body politic" (86). This is a life I will continue to live as a feminist-mothering-mother activist, where feminism is "a liberation struggle" (hooks 22), and mothering is an honour and a learning journey that would not have been lived had it not been for Selma and had I not become Umm Selma.



“The Yamma_Rabba”

Conclusion

Reflecting on the intersections of motherhood, identity, and feminism through my journey reveals profound truths about resilience, care, and agency. The loss of a breast has catalyzed a redefinition of my identity—not just as a mother but as a woman navigating the complexities of societal expectations and personal growth. My relationship with Selma embodies the cyclical and transformative power of caregiving, challenging conventional hierarchies and asserting the radical interdependence central to feminist values.

The limitations of language further illustrate the entrenched patriarchal norms that constrain maternal roles. Yet these constraints provide an opportunity to challenge and reimagine what it means to mother—both as a verb and as a transformative act of love and resistance. Through the writing of this article-diary, I have come to find a space where the personal becomes political and where the acts of care, naming, and resistance form a profound declaration of agency. Rather than a mere reflection on loss, this diary is also a celebration of the resilience inherent in reclaiming one's body, voice, and identity against the forces of patriarchal constraint. Ultimately, my experience speaks not just to one mother's resilience or one daughter's but to the potential for every act of mothering to unravel patriarchal scripts. In reclaiming language and redefining motherhood, we imagine new possibilities for future generations—possibilities anchored in reciprocity, agency, and embodied love. In living as Umm Selma, I carry forward a legacy of resistance and transformation.

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