

# Reconstructing Place For Palestinian Refugee Women

## The Dialectics of Empowerment

by Ilham Abu-Ghazaleh

*Dans cet article, l'auteure explique que le futur des femmes palestiniennes dépend directement de leur accès à*

*l'espace. D'après des entrevues avec des femmes palestiniennes réfugiées dans des camps, l'auteure a découvert que le besoin d'espace de ces femmes est directement lié à leur*

*accès à la terre. Pour ces femmes, l'accès à l'espace et à la terre se traduit par productivité, sociabilité, loisirs, sécurité et santé. Ces facteurs jouent un rôle primordial dans la santé physique et psychologique de ces femmes.*

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Forty-five years ago, in 1948, most Palestinians found themselves out of their country, out of their homes, out of their land. Some ended up in other Arab countries, some in European and western countries, others in what remained of Palestine. From 1948 onwards the area the Palestinians left was almost exclusively inhabited by people of the Jewish faith coming from all over the world (Smootha). This part of Palestine was given the name Israel. When the Palistinians left they believed that their absence would not be longer than several days or weeks.<sup>1</sup>

Instead, 2.6 million Palestinians have been living in camps since 1948 (*Al-Quds Daily* 4 April 1993). Almost half of these are women (Statistical Abstract of Israel). When both time and place are continually changing for a people, what happens to their sense of identity? In examining how Palestinian refugee women construct their past and their present, and, as a result, their identity, this article focuses on the issue of "place"

for Palestinians who have been "(dis)placed." Only two time periods will be discussed: the present and that immediately preceeding 1948.

*My father...the Turks used to take him to the army, and he escaped. We used to be afraid of him when he came back. My brother Abdel-Rahman...[was] killed...when we left [our village]. Seven years I refused to bathe after his death.... As'ad Tartir the British hung him in front of our house. We shouted and cried, but he sang: I am not afraid of the scaffold, oh heroes, the scaffold is a swing for the heroes.... My dear son, they hit him on the kidneys and he is in the cemetery outside the camp now.... My other son, they hit him on the head and he is in the mental asylum in Bethlehem.... How can I be fine? (approximately 100-year-old woman from Al-Am'ari camp)*

This 100 year-old-woman and a great number of her generation have experienced four times and two places in their lifetime. They have lived in the time of the Turks, of the British, of the Jordanians, and now of the Israelis. They have also lived in two places: in their villages in pre-1948 Palestine, and in the camp(s) since then. Other Palestinians have seen more times and more places than this old woman.<sup>2</sup>

The priorities for Palestinian women in terms of "place" are land, their houses, the country. This can be seen in most of the refugee women's narratives. As one women from Balata Camp explained: "Al-Abbasiyyah<sup>3</sup> is very good. It has orchards, it has green plains, it has cultivated land...beautiful, it was very beautiful. My homeland...."

"Land" for Palestinian refugee women takes precedence over house and country. This is not only be-

cause the land prior to 1948 was their "homeland," but also because of the "space" they had in it and the functions that space allowed them. This "place/space" is contrasted with the extremely restricted space they have in their ugly, narrow, dirty, and crowded shelters in the camps, erected in rocky areas with no greenery and no possibility of planting anything. Space allowed these refugee women to accomplish important activities in the past which their current lack of space does not. Lack of space thus affects their productivity, leisure, socialization, safety, and health.

### Productivity

The participation of women in the economic productivity of rural areas in the Third World is well documented (Charlton) as is the participation of women in the Palestinian agricultural productivity (Lang and Mohanna). The Palestinian refugee women interviewed remembered pre-1948 productivity on their land:

*My mother and I used to go and*

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*This space is contrasted with the restricted space they have in their dirty, crowded camps.*

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*join the harvesters in harvesting wheat and corn. We used to cut it and then, my dear, we took the goats, the milk and the camels and went to get the harvest.... We planted corn, we planted wheat, we planted sesame, we planted zucchini, cucumber, tomatoes, bell peppers, and melons. (woman from Al-Am'ari Camp.)*

*We had orchards, we had olive trees, we had land. We used to go to them and harvest. We used to carry the cactus in baskets on our heads....Early in the morning we went for olive picking....We had cows that I fed. We made [bamboo] rugs...I used to sew. Women came from all over for me to sew for them. Most were brides. They used to ask each other: "Did Um Marwan accept to sew your*

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*"Without land,  
without a garden,  
without cows or  
goat, what do you  
think we can do?"*

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*dress?..." Do you know what my mother took with her when we left? She only took the sewing machine, nothing else... (woman from Balata Camp)*

Productivity was time oriented and place oriented. The morning was for house productivity, including goat milking and cheese making. In the afternoon, it was time to join the harvesters in the fields, followed by more work in the house and its garden. All the stories about productivity and the land were accompanied by relaxed facial features, higher and thinner voices, and glowing eyes. Both verbal and non-verbal expressions revealed the pride that productivity gave those women in "that" place at "that" time.

What productivity do their lives in the camps offer them since 1948? When the question was raised the atmosphere in the room changed. The women lowered their heads, their bodies shrank, and helplessness and shame could be sensed. Their voices became low and flat. Most did not answer. Those who did said: "What can be done in this hole [the camp]? Without land, without a garden, without cows or [a] goat, what do you think we can do?" (woman from Al-Am'ari Camp).

### Leisure

In their pre-1948 lives, Palestinian women resorted to nature for relaxation. The plains, streams, lakes, seas,

and mountains were places in which they enjoyed their leisure time.

*We used to spend the summer in the orchards, by the apricot trees and the apple trees.... Under the trees there we spread our mattresses, my father smoked his narjil [hubble bubble] and we drank coffee...a good life it was.... (woman from Balata Camp.*

*We used to go to the mountains to pick thyme, to pick mushrooms...to pick all kinds of herbs. Life was wider, wider.... (woman from Balata Camp)*

The effect of place on the overall morale of Palestinian refugee women can easily be seen. When this was compared to their lives in the camps, the women expressed anger and disdain. A woman from Al-Am'ari Camp comments: "Here? What is here? It's compact. No land. No garden. Where can we go for entertainment?" Another states: "It is so tight. We fight. Where can we go?" A woman from Ein-Beit El-Ma' Camp adds: "Here, we are glued to each other..."

For these women, "place" means "space," an extension of their bodies and their souls in *their* land: its trees, rivers, and mountains. Life in the camp gives them the opposite: no space at all.<sup>4</sup> For women who were used to large, colourful, productive "spaces/places" life in a crowded camp with its ugly, narrow, cement houses built one on top of the other, separated by narrow alleys crowded with children, dirt, and soldiers, is dismal and harsh.

### Socialization

"Space" that offered Palestinian women a "place" for productivity as well as for leisure time also provided them with freedom of action and choice. Prior to 1948, their villages constituted a network of people who had known each other for generations. This gave the women security and strength. The camp, in contrast, limits their freedom. The fact that

the people in the camp come from different villages (in pre-1948 Palestine) creates tension, affecting the women's freedom of movement.

*There, you had your land, you had your house, you were master of yourself...there, we were all from the same village. Here, we come from different towns and villages...we were much more free before, much more free.... (woman from Al-Am'ari Camp)*

*There is no land, no place for the children to play.... I do not allow my daughters to go anywhere. It is not safe.... We want to leave the camp. We want to marry our girls. Will you allow your son to marry a camp girl? (woman from Balata Camp)*

The social dynamics of the camp also affects the marriage prospects of young girls. The pride expressed when they talked about their life in their villages is replaced by feelings of shame from living in the camp.

### Safety

Family members and friends sitting in the room where I was holding the interview could not refrain from voicing their anger. Lack of safety reinforces their lack of "space/place, lack of productivity, and social estrangement.

*My son, when they came to take him in the middle of the night they besieged the house, attacked us, they beat me...they destroyed everything in the house, everything. They showered bullets on my son, the one in the Negev [prison]. They did horrors with us. What can I say? Only cameras can record what they did, words can't... (woman from Balata Camp)*

*At schools, the soldiers take the girls...and I, God may not show you such evil, when shooting starts and the world erupts, where do I*

*go? I go on running to school after my daughters, I go on running. Then I said I do not want this school...tomorrow... [they] will drag them and take them in the jeep. Their brothers came and said where will we find our honour when the soldiers take them? Once this one [pointing to one of her daughters] was about to die. She suffocated from the tear gas bomb. She died. By God she died. Why*

*should we lose our children? No... there is no need for school. (woman from Balata Camp.*

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*“There is no place for the children to play.... I do not allow my daughters to go anywhere.”*

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Women are afraid to leave their houses in case the soldiers come after their children and belongings. They feel it is safer to stay inside which adds to their lack of productivity and their lack of leisure activities, contributing to the tension inside the crowded room(s) of the house. Children are also prevented from going outside because of the fear of the soldiers. Young girls are especially affected by this; they are felt to be particularly at risk and are, therefore, confined to the house until a bridegroom is found. Female children are also prevented from going to school because it, too, is not considered safe. According to a recent study, this situation is forcing parents to marry their daughters off at an early age as it is seen as the best way to keep them safe (Manasra).

### Health

Health can be understood at the psychological level (in terms of freedom, safety, and good social relations) as well as on the physical level. Work offered the Palestinian women both psychological and physical health. A woman from Balata camp states: “That was a life with no disease. We used to work, unlike today...there the land and the orchards give you life....” The kinds of food available, and the way it is ac-

quired are also factors in the women’s physical health. Prior to 1948, “we picked our food by hand, fresh and healthy. Here, it is all canned and stale...” comments one woman from Al-Am’ari Camp. The tension of camp life also leads to physical ailments: “here, one gets sick out of depression...” states another woman from Balata Camp. Lack of space, crowded living conditions, bad housing, and poor general infrastructure in the camp also leads to sickness. “I have no running water. I bring water from outside. I fill a cola bottle each time...” explains the 100-year-old woman from Al-Am’ari Camp.

### Conclusion

When I first started meeting with the Palestinian refugee women, my intention was to see how “space/place” affected their lives. My first question for each was to describe her house in her previous village and the activities she performed inside it. Although they did begin answering my question, their discourse immediately turned to their activities and their life outside the house. Some women described a spacious house, with colourful tiles, colourful window glass, and verandas. Others described a non-spacious house. But the first few phrases were immediately followed by descriptions of the garden around the house, the orchards, the plains, and the activities they carried out in those places/spaces. This leads me to believe that the “house” was less important to them. Life was lived in open spaces: gardens, orchards, plains, rivers, mountains. In light of this, the reality of restricted camp space and crowded camp conditions becomes harsher. The greyness of cement instead of the green orchards and fields, the stench of sewage instead of the fresh aroma of tree blossoms and cultivated land, and the ugly view of cement houses one on top of the other at the base of a rocky mountain is now the dismal “space” to which their lives are restricted.

Listening to their narratives, one sees that for these women “country”

means the place they lived in and in which they could safely enjoy their productivity, sociability, leisure time, and health. It is their land, their “space.” In the camps, they feel alien in a “place” or land which is not their own. “This land is not ours, not ours...one wants to be on one’s land, house, and garden...” says one woman from Ein Beit-El-Ma’ Camp. “I do not want it, this mountain. I want my country, my country. I am free in it, goats and cows and orchards....We [were] living like princesses, we went around freely...” explains another woman from the same camp.

For most people around the world “place” is a constant where time acts to preserve their identity within that “space.” This is not the case for the Palestinians who have been forced to change place more than once since 1948. Even when place remained constant (as in the case of the Palestinians who remained in Palestine that became Israel in 1948) or was changed only once (as for those driven to live in that part of Palestine now called “the West Bank”) their identity within that “space” changed.

Change of place has drastically affected their lives. Coming from a farming background, land/space was of tantamount importance. Palestinian women want to go back to their land “even if to live in a tent” as a woman from Ein Beit-El-Ma’ camp

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*“This land is not ours, not ours...one wants to be on one’s land, house, and garden...”*

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passionately said. Whether her wish is attainable or not has become a political question and is not in the scope of this article. This article stresses, however, that the need for “space/place/land” that can give Palestinian women the possibility of productivity, safety, freedom, health, and pride should be taken into consideration in any future plans that concern

them. The "camp" must not be their "place" of permanent dwelling. It has caused both physical and psychological distress and has damaged their pride. Planners should compensate for the loss of land and for the suffering of these women by offering them a situation that resembles what they had before. It would be drastically wrong, for example, to replace the camps with high-rise buildings, as this would again imprison them and add to their suffering. We need to offer them land to live on, so they can enjoy the productivity of planting it, socializing on it, and inhaling its fresh aroma. They need a landscape that can return to them the feelings of well-being and pride they have been deprived of for the last forty-six years.

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<sup>1</sup>The author met with Palestinian refugee women in the camps of the West Bank and Gaza and recorded their narratives. The women were asked to describe their native villages prior to 1948, their homes, and their activities and relations both inside and outside the home. There is a great deal of conflicting literature on how the Palestinians became refugees. The women interviewed indicated that they and families were either under gun fire or that they saw mass killings of Palestinians or heard of such killings. All, however, indicated they then believed their absence from their houses and villages would be for "a short period of time, until the shooting stopped."

<sup>2</sup>Since 1948 Palestinians have encountered several migrations. Kuwait was one of the last places of refuge for Palestinians. Nevertheless, during the Gulf War in 1991, 350,000 Palestinians were obliged to leave Kuwait.

<sup>3</sup>Al-Abbasiyya was a Palestinian, village outside Jaffa prior to 1948. It no longer exists.

<sup>4</sup>Gaza, for example, is cited to have the densest population in the world. Approximately three quarters of a million refugees live with other non-

refugee Palestinians and Jewish settlement in an area that is 320 square km (*Al-Quds Daily* 21 January 1993).

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