

Feminism and Difference

The Struggle of Palestinian Women

by Nabla Abdo

Cet article met en valeur le rôle des femmes palestiniennes dans la création de leur propre histoire ainsi que comme agentes de changements. L'auteure examine le contexte particulier d'un grand nombre de femmes palestiniennes tout

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en critiquant l'«orientalisme» et le colonialisme, ces paramètres occidentaux qui restreignent une réelle compréhension de la vie des femmes arabes.

In this article I will focus on Palestinian women as real subjects with a decisive role in the making of their history and society, women as primary agents for change. But since I am conscious of my position/locality, namely, as a Palestinian feminist living, working, and active in the west, I must first contextualize our struggles within the western construct.

Orientalist feminism lingers on

The construction of Arab and/or Muslim women as the "different other," as *objects* of passivity, silence, submission, veil, and seclusion has occupied many western feminists for the past decade and a half. Instead of perceiving them as historical *subjects* with real life experiences, western feminists (including some Arab and Muslim feminists) have tended to construct women from an "orientalist" point of view, and as a result, have treated all Arab and Muslim women as an undifferentiated monolithic group (see Gadant; Ghussoub).

In the late 1980s, Arab feminists began to be relieved at not having to start their public discourse with self-defence for their presumed silence or over-subjugation. This relative intellectual tranquillity was largely brought about by the emergence of a wide body of literature on deconstructing orientalism and contextualizing Arab lived experiences. The work of feminists such as Marnia Lazreg (1988;1994), Leila Ahmed (1982;1992), Fatima Mernissi, Leila Abu-Lughod, and Mervat Hatem (1986;1993), to mention a few, was crucial in this regard. By exposing the colonial premises on which Orientalism bases its presentation, or

rather Re-presentation of Arab women's reality, these feminists were able to reconstruct Arab women as subjects by historicizing their lives and contextualizing their experiences. Other feminists have engaged directly with the concept/phenomenon of orientalist feminism (Lazreg, 1994; Abdo, 1993; Hammami and Reiker).

As a result of this scholarship, in the late 1980s, the western feminist obsession with "studying" Arab/Muslim women from an exclusively or pre-dominantly cultural or culturist perspective, focusing on symbols like the veil and harem, began to subside. The veil was stripped of the "oneness" and "sameness" bestowed on it by orientalist feminists. Instead, the veil was represented as a complex phenomenon, to be understood in a historical context. It is due to the anti-orientalist scholarship that Islam as a historical concept and changing ideology came to replace the monolithic and static "Islam" of the orientalist. Finally, Islam as religion was separated from Islamicism(s) as political movements.

Unfortunately, however, this process was abruptly halted with the 1990 US invasion of Iraq, which gave racist orientalism against Arabs and Muslims a new lease on life. As various authors have observed, the Gulf War was not waged at the economic and political levels alone but at the cultural one as well (see Bresheeth and Yuval-Davis). Attacks on Arabs and Muslims in general and Iraqis and Palestinians in particular became rampant in many western centres. Once again, the image of the "Arab-equals-veil, terrorism, and Islam" reemerged in western public culture.

Western state hostility towards Arabs and Muslims appeared in the work of feminists and progressive/left academics. The reaction to the treatment of veiled women in Canadian schools is an example. In a recent debate over the issue, I heard one feminist political scientist justifying Quebec's recent racist educational policies against veiling in the classrooms using interesting logic. She argued that "we feminists should reject veiling in favour of the secularization of our society in general and our educational system in particular." While the logic is interesting and acceptable to me as a feminist, I found it very problematic. This logic is not applied to other religions and religious phenomena and definitely not to the Judeo-Christian tradition which reigns in the West. Moreover, as I argued at the time, in spite of what it claims, Canadian society in general and its educational system in particular are not "secular" nor "democratic."

The dominant perspective continues to reproduce "difference" as an "inferior" other. In this "othering" process, Arab/Muslim women continue to be presented as the "imagined" objects rather than as "real" subjects.

Palestinian women as "other"

Although Palestinian women are usually lumped together in the homogenous concept of "Arab/Muslim other" they, nonetheless, acquire specific characteristics. As Edward Said observed, Palestinians are usually associated with "kidnapping", "terrorism," and "violence." It is true that the *Intifada* has had a major impact in changing the images of Palestinian women in the West; from "passive," "submissive," and "domestics" to public participants, popular organizers, and builders of society. This newly earned image, unfortunately, was not allowed to

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grow. The Gulf war, which was accompanied by women's anti-war demonstrations throughout the Arab world and particularly by Palestinian women in the Occupied Territories and Jordan, has put another constraint on Palestinian women. Instead of properly interpreting their activities as anti-war, Palestinian women were seen as supporters of Saddam Hussein's "terrorism."

The specificity of the Palestinian case, many have observed, is largely tied to their location in the Middle East struggle. When faced with Palestinian rights for identity, self determination, and freedom, the West finds itself in an ambiguous situation, forced to abandon, or at least change its traditional alliance with the state of Israel. The strength of the Zionist lobby in the West and the lingering legacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition continue to place stumbling blocks in the path of any genuine recognition and understanding of Palestinian struggle in general and women's struggle in particular.

The struggle of Palestinian women

The struggle of Palestinian women has been going on for about a century. The first phase of the struggle can be identified as the national and anti-colonial struggle which dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. As Palestine was subjugated to British colonialism and Zionist settlement, Palestinian national identity began to be formed and their national anti-colonial struggles to be waged. At this stage, women participated as supporters of men. Middle and upper-class women staged demonstrations and wrote petitions to the colonial government both in Jerusalem and in London. While peasant women were largely waging an economic war, resisting the confiscation of their land and its expropriation, they also lent significant support to the guerrilla resistance in the countryside.

A number of peasant women carried weapons and fell as martyrs between the 1920s and the 1930s. Without going into any further details, it is possible to suggest that this period was dominated by a traditional male nationalist agenda.

The second phase of the struggle is characterized by a combination of gender issues with the national and anti-colonial struggle. This phase spans over a period of 20 to 25 years. Palestinian women's active participation in the national struggle here took various forms, representing the state of expulsion, refugee(ism), and dispersal of the population which affected the nation. During this period the General Union of Palestinian Women was formed as a unifying umbrella organization for Palestinian women of all political allegiances. Chapters for this "Union" were established in every centre with Palestinian populations, including North America.

As a result of the dispersal of Palestinians during this period, one cannot speak of a single experience called "Palestinian women's experience." The experience of those living under Israeli occupation for example, differs from the experience of those living in Lebanon, or Syria, or in the Gulf. Nonetheless, some very general themes which characterize this period can be noted. One such theme is the normal tension between women's struggles and the national liberation struggle. In the Palestinian case, this tension was manifested differently in the various locations in which Palestinians resided. For example, women's struggle in exile, particularly through the General Union of Palestinian Women, was overwhelmingly nationalist in character. Their expulsion from their homeland aggravated their sense of alienation and gave their primary enemy—Israel and Zionism—an overwhelming priority over any other form of oppression. The prioritization of the national over the gender largely characterized Palestinian women's struggle during this period.

The tension between women and national liberation began to be expressed in a more complex manner by women in the Occupied Territories, particularly during the *Intifada* which began in 1988. As Palestinian women began to confront the enemy directly in the streets, take more significant public roles, get involved in the building of a new infrastructure for a potential independent entity, their gender consciousness was simultaneously developing. By the third year of the *Intifada*, women's NGOs have mushroomed throughout the Occupied Territories. First, the women's *Utor* (grass-roots organizations) began to increase their popularity by providing some services to women at a grass roots level, then women's centres for study, research, training, and other services also began to emerge (see Abdo 1991).

The women's study centres have begun to develop as core resource locations for issues of gender importance. These centres, which sprang up almost simultaneously in Ramalla, Jerusalem, Nablus, and Gaza, were able to gradually declare their independence from the traditional male political leadership. Their political independence was

crucial for developing their women's agenda which required separating women's issues from the national issues and dealing with the former as legitimate issues on their own terms. While still in their incipient stages, feminist consciousness and feminist issues have begun to be addressed publicly in most of these centres.

The third and current phase in Palestinian women's struggle represents the culmination of the long history of struggle waged by them. This culmination is not just quantitative in that more Palestinian women have become active and involved, but qualitative as well. There has been a major change in the agenda of "traditional" women's

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organizations. For example, in 1994, the General Union of Palestinian Women—brought to the Occupied Territories with the *quasi*-national-government—has accepted the radical challenge of ratifying the "Document on Principles of Women's Rights" prepared by leftists, feminists, and other progressive academics and activists.

Currently, and despite the delicacy of the national question which is facing a historic threat by the Oslo Accord (the "peace" agreement struck between representatives of the PLO and Israel in November 1993), Palestinian women's insistence on pushing their own liberation at the forefront of their agenda is gaining momentum. This is true for Palestinian women beyond the Occupied Territories as well. Here, in North America, the Union of Palestinian Women's Association, for example, has changed its agenda from one of "solidarity with our sisters and brothers under occupation," into one which focuses on women's problems, life, and experiences in North America. This shift is also manifested in the "Union's" published literature. For example, the recent issues of *Sout al Mara'a* (the Voice of Woman) contains literature which deals with social-gender issues ranging from rape and violence against women (killings on grounds of "family honour") to population control and reproductive technologies.

A noticeable shift towards improving sex-gender relations appears to be taking place in the Occupied Territories today. For example, The Women Study Centre/Jerusalem has developed a document identifying Palestinian women professionals in various fields. The intent is to provide the government-in-process with evidence of the abilities and skills of women as potential participants in the future rule. *Showo'n al-Mara'a* (Women's Affairs) in Gaza, on the other hand, appears to be assuming a leading role in preparing women to take an active role in the

political life of the nation. They are training women to work in media professions. Part of this training is done locally—in Gaza—and part is done abroad.

The Women's Studies Committee at Beisan Centre in Ramalla has just completed a survey on violence against women in the area of Ramalla. While the results are yet to be compiled, it is worth following this development and monitoring its impact—if any—on policy in the Territories.

Three developments are particularly significant; the work of the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, the Women's Centre for Legal Aid, and Counselling and the Women Studies Program at Birzeit University. The importance of these developments is that they operate at different levels; official/formal, public/grass-roots, and academic.

Although established in the early 1990s as a result of a male directive, the Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC) emerged as a response to women's struggle and the repeated calls of women for inclusion in the Madrid Talks. Unlike other Technical Committees, most of which were turned into Ministries or formalized as offices when self-rule was established in Gaza, the Women's Technical Committee is still fighting to be recognized formally as an official body responsible for promoting women's issues and overseeing gender equality in Palestine.

This body is currently working on a number of options for its integration into the main body politic of self-rule. One option is the establishment of a Ministry for Women's Affairs. This would give both legislative and executive powers over women's affairs. Another option is to create a Women's Directorate. A third option is to place women's committees in Ministries which involve women's lives directly, such as Labour, Social Welfare, Education, etc. The first option is preferable but it does not appear to be gaining sufficient support from "above." Any of these options are likely to effect qualitative change in the lives of Palestinian women.

The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling is different from other women's centres in that it is made up of professional women trained in the law and social counselling, such as lawyers, social workers, and criminologists. The centre has just completed a major study on Women and Shari'a Laws in the Occupied Territories. The study looked at various aspects of the Shari'a Laws as they impact on women's lives and approached these issues from a gender/feminist perspective. It outlines laws, regulations, norms, and traditions which have played a role in oppressing Palestinian women historically. The study recommended reforms to the Laws which would promote women's equality and improve their socio-economic status. Expertise of feminist legal professionals in Egypt and Jordan is also relied upon as the religious laws of both countries were implemented in Gaza and the West Bank respectively. The results of this type of research could have far reaching implications if implemented by the Technical Committee on Women, once it achieves official status.

This Centre does not confine its work to the theoretical aspect of women's legal rights. In addition, professional staff, lawyers, and social workers conduct consciousness raising workshops and lectures for women in villages and refugee camps. This outreach program is significant in that it reaches women in relatively remote areas. Raising women's consciousness of their rights—even in accordance with the Shari'a Laws—in areas of divorce, custody of children, marriage, property, and violence against women, can serve as a catalyst in promoting the democratization process.

The Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University is

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another development which has become a reality in the past few months. Initiated by a group of feminist academics at Birzeit University, the Program had to overcome various institutional hurdles. With some financial support from international agencies including the International Development Research Council of Canada, the Program commenced its activities by providing a number of "women's courses." Developing the Program into an Institute or a Department, however, is just one goal for this feminist group.

The second and equally important goal for this group is to promote feminist research and critical analyses of areas affecting women, such as education, economics and labour, and culture and family. During the months of November and December 1994, the Program launched a major conference/workshop involving local academics and researchers as well as international feminist scholars to discuss feminist research methodologies and their application to the Palestinian context. The aim of the women's future research is twofold: to redress the gender gap and the absence of women in most of the literature on Palestinian history; and to influence policy makers when decisions about women's lives are made.

Conclusion

The above discussion on Palestinian women's struggle, particularly in its current manifestations, has largely focused on one type of struggle, namely the struggle taking place through organized institutions and NGOs. While not denying the struggles waged every day in Palestinian women's lives (for example, their economic struggle and political resistance particularly against Israeli occupation), the emphasis on these forms serves a particular purpose. These forms of organized activism express a qualitative

change in the struggle of Palestinian women. These forms of activism attest to the prioritization of women's issues and the shifts in emphasis from the national (read, male) realm to the sex-gender sphere. Moreover, at this historical stage the Palestinian nation—albeit fragmented and unequally represented—is acquiring a new institutional form, the form of a "state." Regardless of the independence, or rather lack of independence of this state, and despite its relative weakness in relation to its own subject-citizens as well as in its relationship to the region, an official or quasi official state formation is underway.

In order to be actively involved in the institution building of their own nation/society, Palestinian women, through the various organizations mentioned above, are capitalizing on the moment by carving out the socio-political space they need for themselves. In this regard, Palestinian women are sending out an important and promising message: our struggles will not be shelved and our historical role will be recognized.

It is impossible to say that Palestinian women's current achievements were easy to accomplish or that it will be easy to predict what the future (even the near future) holds. The current struggle between the "national" authority and foreign "donors" on the amount and direction of funds and loans is likely to have an impact on the future role of all NGOs. It is not a secret that the "state" which needs all possible funding will fight hard to seize control over all possible funds. Consequently, the institutionalization of women's NGOs or their incorporation by the state will undoubtedly change the quality and direction of their work.

Moreover, the Women's Affairs Technical Committee has yet to establish itself as a representative women's body. So far, women "leaders" in the Technical Committee are a mixture of progressive, left, feminist, independent, and professional women. Despite their differences, they can still deliver a feminist or at least a progressive women's agenda. But what will happen to such a body if it falls under the control of the state and the latter appoints its own "women" instead?

Finally, the threat to Palestinian women's struggle and the gains they have accomplished so far is not confined to the problematic character of the current national authority. In other words, the threat to Palestinian women's improved status is not confined to the male patriarchal and tribal/familial structure of the current national rule. Social forces such as the Islamicists (Hamas and Jihad) can have an equally, if not more devastating, role in impeding women's progress. In fact, it is likely that the relative strength and independence currently enjoyed by women's organizations is a reflection of the current balance in political powers. This balance leaves the "state" in an uneasy position. On the one hand, the state is trying to uphold an image of a democratic authority. On the other hand, in order to not alienate the Islamicist forces, the state will refrain from taking any drastic step on women's issues.

The vacillating position of the authorities in relation to

women's issues is also evident from the general attitudes of the authorities to issues concerning the family and women's sexual and social wellbeing. For example, the decision of the Palestinian national authority to send a male headed delegation to represent the "Palestinian" position at the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994 is, to say the least, a grave insult to women. The insult is not a result of the sex of the "representative," but rather of the position this "representative" took on all vital issues at the Conference, and most importantly on abortion, sexual education, and contraceptives (see Abdo, 1994). Whether the authorities' weakness and consequent vacillation on women's issues continue to characterize the relationship between women and the state after the elections to come or whether these attitudes and policies are just reflections of a transitional period remains to be seen.

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