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Book Review: Displaced at Home: Ethnicity and Gender among Palestinians in Israel

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Displaced at Home: Ethnicity and Gender among Palestinians in Israel

2010. Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh & Isis Nusair, eds. State University of New York Press, Albany. 264 pages. (Paperback). ISBN 978-1-4384-3270-0.

Reviewed by Elmé Vivier

The establishment of Israel in 1948 involved a process of expulsion and displacement of 725,000 Palestinians in an event that has come to be known by Palestinians as the Nakba (Catastrophe). Those Palestinians who remained and now live in Israel continue to be marginalised and discriminated against as an ethnic, non-Jewish minority. Although eventually given citizenship status, Palestinian citizens of Israel still face restrictions in terms of economic and political participation and mobility, and are subject to land expropriation and home demolitions. They have literally become "strangers in their own land" (217).

Displaced at Home investigates the plight of Palestinians living in Israel and offers a rich collection of narratives and analyses by Palestinian woman scholars of Israel. It challenges tendencies to generalise Palestinian identity and practice and rather reflects the diversity of perspectives, attitudes and issues related to and significant in the Palestinian experience in Israel. It also problematises scholarship that presents Palestinian citizens of Israel "as passive recipients of history" (22).

The book is structured around four key themes, namely the state and ethnicity, memory and oral history, gendering bodies and space, and migrations. Across these themes and individual chapters, the authors carry the reader swiftly from the global to the local, teasing out issues regarding political activism and other forms of agency and resistance, space and mobility, and personal and family relations, amongst others. Many of the chapters are specifically gendered analyses that explore matters related to the double marginalisation of Palestinian women.

The first three chapters comprise the state and ethnicity theme. In Chapter 1, Leena Dallasheh examines the efforts of al-'Ard, a nationalist and pan-Arab movement established in 1959 by a group of Palestinian citizens of Israel. Members of al-'Ard demanded the right of return of Palestinian refugees, the return of confiscated land, the right to full and equal political, social and economic recognition of Palestinians by the Israeli state, and an end to military rule and all discriminatory laws. The movement was unique insofar as it utilised the legal mechanisms and institutions of the state to challenge its discriminatory policies, which it framed in terms of its Zionism. Dallasheh traces the legal battles between al-'Ard and the Israeli state and courts. After its attempts to acquire a license to publish a newspaper was denied by the Supreme Court, al-'Ard was not dissuaded but followed with an attempt to establish a company, then an association, and finally a political party. The Supreme Court decisions reveal, she argues, the repression and marginalisation experienced by the movement, based not in any threat of violence against the state, but its Palestinian-nationalist ideology and its illegitimacy in the view of the Zionist ideology and nature of the Israeli state.

The role of military service as a mechanism of dividing Palestinian citizens into ethnic minorities is the subject of Chapter 2. In it, Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh brings into question any proclaimed Arab loyalty to the Jewish state, and further problematises military service as a useful mode for Palestinians to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the

state. Military service, she argues, is a socio-political tool used by the state to divide Palestinians into ethnic minorities. This serves to both weaken the Palestinian nation and to strengthen the identification of certain subgroups (such as the Bedouins) with the state. The Bedouins in particular are “targeted as a special minority” (40), with military service deemed a worthwhile choice among them. Although military service is appealing due to the perceived social, economic and political opportunities that follow (further employment, public services, potential to lease land), Kanaaneh’s research shows that, more often than not, military service does not necessarily counteract the predominance of the ideological and structural constraints of a system based on the Jewish/non-Jewish dichotomy. Bedouins are therefore still subject to discriminatory and divisive policies, even within the military, as well as to land confiscations and home demolitions, with many still living in unrecognised villages without public services such as electricity. At the heart of this situation, Kanaaneh underscores the internal contradiction of the Arab soldier who serves in a security apparatus whose existence depends on the view of the Arab as a “source of insecurity” (45). Thus the Arab soldier “must fight against the very insecurity he embodies and of which he cannot entirely rid himself” (ibid.). Notwithstanding the continued discrimination of soldiers and veterans on the one hand, and criticism of service by Palestinians on the other, military service does present an avenue of ‘acting’ within an oppressive state. Underlying the discussion is the question of identity and belonging, which are continually revealed, affirmed and contested in all its contradictory elements throughout the book.

How Israeli citizenship and the notion of ‘Palestinian citizens of Israel’ are both represented and contested through hip-hop is the focus of chapter 3. As a local art form, hip-hop has grown significantly since the killing of thirteen Palestinians by Israeli police and military in October 2000 (53). According to the author, Amal Equeiq, Palestinian hip-hop represents a mode of resistance and criticism driven by issues of Palestinian identity and citizenship, discriminatory laws and police brutality (57). Hip-hop artists such as DAM, which is the main focus of the chapter, affirm Palestinian heritage and challenge the power of the state over that of nationhood (59). The growing popularity, even internationally, of Palestinian artists further suggest that this medium has the potential to create new vocabularies and open new public spaces, thus engaging young Palestinians in the political discourse regarding the Palestinian ‘condition’. Equeiq concludes by urging further research and engagement with this politically conscious artistic movement.

In chapter 4, Isis Nusair analyses the perceptions and narratives of three generations of Palestinian women in Israel, and thereby asks who has the right to narrate the past. Nusair finds that all three generations of women understand themselves and make sense of the present socio-political reality through the past. Differences between the generations notwithstanding, the local and the personal remain the primary sites of resistance, belonging and empowerment (78, 90). Most women linked gendered power relations in the family and community to their experiences of the imposition of the Israeli state in Palestinian lives and livelihood. All also agree that the third generation women have achieved greater liberation in terms of access to education, jobs, politics and the public space in general. For Nusair, the women’s narratives affirm “the spatially and politically constructed nature of gender roles” and identity (90), and reveal how the constraints and opportunities at a given locality influence how identities and boundaries are shaped.

Fatma Kassem in chapter 4 explores the life narratives of Palestinian women living in Lydd and Ramleh, so-called mixed cities with both Jewish majority and Palestinian minority populations. According to Kassem, Palestinian women living in Israel are doubly marginalised and silenced, on the one hand as Arabs within the Jewish state, and on the other as women within a Palestinian patriarchal society. The chapter is an attempt to give a voice and legitimacy to Palestinian women and their memories and histories. It also focuses on language as a central space for and expression of the struggle for recognition and resistance. One of the author's key findings is that most women interviewed did not use the term *Nakba*, a fundamental part of Palestinian consciousness, to refer to the events of 1948. Rather, they used phrases such as "when the Jews entered" or "when Israel took us", which are from the private sphere and indicative of the penetration of a woman by a man. The author reads in this the women's exclusion but also freedom from nationalist political discourses, coupled with an attempt to recover and reconstruct themselves and their communities after the event. The women's stories about their daily lives revolve around issues of insecurity, home invasions, drugs and honour killings and reflect and are intermingled with their understanding of the past.

Honaida Ghanim reflects on the impact of the Green Line border establishing the boundaries of Israel, and recounts stories from her family and her village of Marjeh, which is situated in the Triangle region of Israel on the border with the West Bank. Although a brief and personal account, chapter 6 illuminates the social impact of the border and the restrictions on movement imposed on Palestinians. In many cases dividing not only villages and towns but family members, the border, Ghanim argues, has become a "site for the intensive practice of power but also intensive resistance" (111). From subtle family encounters at the border to stealthy border crossings, it is a site against which and through which social ties are still preserved.

Under the theme of gendering bodies and space, Lena Meari looks at the roles of Palestinian peasant women in the village of al-Birweh from 1930 to 1960, and how their work roles were affected by changes in the larger political and economic context, especially in terms of land ownership and land expropriation (119). Al-Birweh was one of the villages destroyed in the *Nakba* and its population had to re-settle as refugees elsewhere. The author argues against the perception of a strict dichotomy between gender roles and sexual division among Arabs, and rather affirms a flexible and contestable dynamic in the division of labour in al-Birweh (120). She also challenges the notion of Palestinian peasant women as passive subjects of their social, political and economic environment. She argues that before, during and after 1949, women had essential and shifting roles in sustaining their households and re-settling their families in the aftermath of the *Nakba*. Mobility and opportunity for this particular group has, however, been severely limited since 1948.

In chapter 8, Taghreed Yahia-Younis explores the complexity of voting in municipal elections and the ways women negotiate the expectations imposed upon them. Since municipal elections provide an important institutional space for Palestinians to participate directly in local politics, women's participation and loyalties are important on many social and political levels. The author focuses specifically on the different tensions women experience depending on whether they married outside of their *hamuleh* (the largest familial unit) or not, and whether their place of origin and place of residence are different (133). She highlights the contradictions and tensions in the impact of this

group's votes, especially between the principle of belonging by birth and belonging by marriage. She finds that the type of marriage, whether endogamous or exogamous, is a primary determining factor in how a woman can or does vote (140). Although she traces different patterns between marriage types, overall, women exercise varying degrees of freedom and often 'violate' the common normative expectation to follow one's husband's decision. This challenges the perceived power of men over women and the common view of a gender/power binary (150).

Perceptions and practices of sexuality among Palestinian women is the subject of chapter 9. Sexuality remains a largely taboo topic, both politically and socially. Through qualitative interviews and focus groups, Manal Shalabi finds that most participants acknowledge the cultural norm of virginity before marriage, as well as the link between sexuality and religion and family honour (158). Women, especially as mothers, also often support the system that reinforces their collective inferiority by imposing restrictions on themselves and their daughters in order to preserve their honour or acquire other individual benefits (159-160). However, responses reveal that many women both want and are able to stretch the norms and embrace their sexuality in a variety of ways. Ultimately, the interviewees expressed positions imbued with contradiction with regard to attitudes about their bodies (ranging from love to disgust), about the influence of western values and about the importance of Palestinian tradition. Shalabi concludes that Palestinian society and values are complex and heterogeneous with degrees of individual agency practiced within it (156).

In chapter 10, Areej Sabbagh-Khoury investigates the lack of strong opposition among Palestinians in Israel to the state's immigration policies, primarily the Law of Return which allows most Jews in the world citizenship status, while the return of Palestinian refugees is heavily restricted (173). The author explains that, over the period of 1989 and 1991, the issue of the right of return was hardly, if at all, discussed in the Arabic press, even though this was a period of increasing immigration of Jews to Israel. Through interviews with key members of select Palestinian political parties, she highlights the contradictions pervading the Palestinian consciousness. Although most interviewees oppose the Law of Return and even argue for its abolishment, reasons for silence on this issue include a sense of powerlessness to change discriminatory laws, fear of the military and state violence especially after the Nakba and the period of military rule, economic dependence, and need for pragmatic evaluations, among others.

The custom of patrilocal residence, where women move their place of residence upon marriage to that of the husband and his family, is the topic of chapter 11. According to Lilian Abou-Tabickh, this process is a form of invisible or "masked migration" as it is not formally considered migration and is largely ignored in the literature on Palestinian migration in Israel (192). She therefore examines the multifarious elements involved in the practice, such as education, employment, and cultural and institutional limits, all of which inform the freedom of movement and choice of residence for Palestinian women in Israel. Reasons given for such migration included love, concerns of utility and personal benefit, and perceived unchangeable fate (197). However, Abou-Tabickh argues that the centrality of the family in Palestinian society, as well as the system of differential inheritance whereby family assets are passed on to sons limit the real choices of women. Moreover, the larger social, economic and political context, especially Judaization and

land expropriation policies, do not give Palestinian families much choice in terms of where they can live (203-204).

In Chapter 12, Ibtisam Ibrahim interviews several highly educated Palestinian women from Israel who have emigrated to the United States, Canada or Europe. According to Ibrahim, the issue of female emigration remains largely unexamined in the literature. Like many other authors in the book, Ibrahim identifies with the subject of her study and thus is able to present personal narrative alongside that of interviewees. She finds that these women share many of the same motivations for their migration, especially a desire for better education and career opportunities which are limited in Israel, frustration with the social and economic discrimination they feel at home, frustration with the lack of freedom of speech in Israeli universities and institutions, and a desire for greater independence. While some women followed their husbands abroad, most of her interviewees went of their own initiative. Unlike women emigrants of other developing countries, Palestinian women are generally not assisted by social or familial networks. Interestingly, most women feel that their decision to move abroad is only temporary and express a continued connection to their home and a desire to one day return.

The commitment to the land and to the Palestinian nation is one of the recurring threads throughout this book. However, reading this book gives one the sense that Palestinians are in no way blind to the social and political complexity of their existence. Overall, *Displaced at Home* reveals how personal, familial and larger social dynamics and power relations are wholly political and embedded in the past. And although most experience a sense of insecurity and powerlessness, there are also many and varied instances of agency and resistance. Thus, one gets the impression of a community living in tension and in contradiction with its context, and yet finding ways and spaces through which to confirm Palestinian national identity and history on the one hand, and individual identities and rights on the other. It must be noted that the primarily qualitative research methodology comprising sometimes only a small number of interviews would benefit from further study. This should not be seen as a weakness of the book, however, as it is precisely in the gaps of current scholarship and the often ignored voices of the subaltern that the authors comprising this book situate themselves. As such, it confirms the legitimacy of the Palestinian right to speak and contributes to our understanding of the conditions, challenges, practices of resistance and general modes of living of Palestinian citizens of Israel.