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Book Review: Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gendered Memory

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Palestinian Women: Narrative histories and gendered memory. 2011. Fatma Kassem. Zed Books 264 pp. (Paperback) ISBN 9781848134232 (hb) 9781848134249 (paperback) 9781848134256. \$129.95.

Reviewed by Desire Chilwane¹

'Palestinian Women' is based on the oral testimonies of twenty ordinary urban Palestinian women living in Lyd and Ramleh who witnessed the events of 1948 which resulted in the formation of the State of Israel. These women are amongst those Palestinians who remained after the war. Kassem argues that "this documentation of their life stories serves as a much-needed corrective to their ongoing exclusion from historical documents and collective memory" (p. 5). Kassem starts by situating herself in the book. She is a Palestinian woman who grew up in Israel. She discusses her family, her upbringing and early life experiences and how these have shaped her views as a Palestinian and as a woman. Kassem learnt about Palestinian history, especially the stories related to the 1948 events, from her father's storytelling during her childhood. Her father told them about courageous acts by their people. She also remembers how her mother never participated; as if what she had to say did not matter. Kassem argues that it is result of this patriarchal society that Palestinian women are absent from official Palestinian history. The women are also silenced by virtue of being Palestinians living in Israel- Israel forbids Palestinians from discussing Palestinian history in public spheres. So, unlike Palestinian men who can share their stories in intimate spaces, women are completely silenced. Kassem aims to "create equal spaces for [the] silenced voices not as complementary to men's stories, but as worthwhile and deserving of visibility in their own right" (p. 39).

In the second chapter, Kassem gives a brief history of the cities Lyd and Ramleh. These two cities were previously populated by Palestinian majority until 1948 when a lot of Palestinians were displaced from their homes. Those whom were needed as labourers were allowed to remain in the cities. Today, Palestinians make up a small fraction of the population in both cities and are living in unfavourable conditions of poverty, high unemployment and an ineffective education system. It was surprising to these women that someone was interested in their stories and not their husbands' or sons', especially because these stories were to be documented. At the same time, they were grateful to be afforded a place in history. In their narratives, the women spoke mostly about their experiences of dealing with daily routine and re-establishing family life after the events of 1948.

Getting the women to speak out was not easy, some were reluctant to speak out of fear of being oppressed and sometimes it was their families who silenced them. Silencing agents were usually husbands and sons but there were also instances where the women took the role too. A certain woman refused that her mother be interviewed because she feared that it might jeopardize her position at the Israeli college she worked for. When they did allow the women to speak out, the silencing agents would sit in on the interviews and silence the study participants on certain topics and; they sometimes also participated in the storytelling. Kassem observed that unmarried women expressed more agency than the ones who were married.

Kassem is aware how indifferent she is to the women she is trying to give a voice to because of her Palestinian identity. She says that “Palestinian women who focus on Palestinian historiography have found no place for their scholarly work in Israeli academic institutions” (p. 62). The women who were interviewed were 65 years or older and only four of them had formal schooling (of no longer than four years). Thus, oral data collection was the best method to employ because of the illiteracy among the women. In the transcription process, Kassem realizes that to some extent, these women cannot own up to their stories because she is the one who decides what is or not relevant, what to put down or exclude; so that in the end, these women’s stories are told on her terms.¹

In chapter 3, Kassem describes and analyses the approval process for her PhD research proposal upon which this book is based. Her research proposal was approved by her supervisor and Head of Department but in order for the approval process to be finalized, the proposal had to be approved by one more School in the university. The Dean of the school rejected her research proposal without following protocol which governed doctoral work at the university. According to the rules and regulations of the university, Kassem was suppose to sit for the Candidacy Examination which is “meant to test the Candidate’s approach to the topic and his/her adequate grounding in the research area and the relevant literature, and to measure his/her skills and suitability for such doctoral research” (p. 66). Kassem believes that the Dean used his position of academic authority to discriminate against her because of the nature of her research topic. The author was informed that in order for her research proposal to be approved, she had to make certain vocabulary changes to her proposal. One of the terms that the Dean had a problem with was ‘Nakba’, which the Palestinians use to refer to the 1948 war, because such word conflicted with Israeli history. She argues that her Palestinian identity further disadvantaged her because Jewish researchers used the term freely. Kassem refers to academic freedom which is necessary to bring new knowledge; the Dean was denying her that freedom because the new knowledge she sought to bring forth did not feed a Zionist narrative that the Dean subscribed to. A Palestinian researcher who researches Palestinian history is perceived as “being ‘subjective’, emotional and charged with ‘promoting propaganda and not research’”, but when her Jewish Israeli colleagues undertake similar research, they are perceived as “‘objective’ and ‘scientific’, even when they criticize Zionist axioms” (p.77). Kassem’s research proposal was eventually accepted with only minor changes after the appointment of a new dean.

The fourth chapter concentrates on the language used by the Palestinian women when telling their life stories. Kassem argues that their choice of words showed resistance to the delegitimization of their Palestinian history while also challenging their absence in Palestinian national history. After 1948, the spelling of the names of the cities Lyd and Ramleh were Hebraized so that the pronunciation also changed. The Palestinian inhabitants of the two cities insist on pronouncing the name of the cities in their original Arabic form, in essence resisting the erasure of Palestinian history. The women also used sexual metaphors to explain the invasion of the Israelis into their land. They used terms like ‘entered’, ‘came in’ and ‘took us’, which are used in everyday language to describe sexual penetration of a woman by a man. These terms especially refer to a woman’s first sexual encounter where she is inexperienced and unprepared for sexual intercourse. In the

¹ Human Sciences Research Council

same way, these women were not ready for the forceful invasion of the Israeli into their land and homes. These accounts of the 1948 events are gendered and the comparison drawn between the two events are very strong. The way in which these women remember the 1948 war is distinct and offers new insights to our understanding of the events.

In chapter 5, Kassem discusses and interprets the way in which the women recall historical events through bodily performance, experiences and images of the body during different historical periods. For the Palestinians, “the body becomes a subversive site of resistance and commemoration” (p.131). The women remember through the body the experiences of the 1948 war. Common themes that emerged were sights of dead people in the roads, hunger and thirst. The women remember drinking unclean water, animal’s urine and eating foods that would otherwise be suitable for animals to ensure survival. When discussing the male body, the women spoke openly about the men who revolted against the British imperialists but they held back when speaking about the Palestinian resistance fighters in 1948. Kassem argues that this may be because the women were Palestinian and living in a state that defeated them and also; some of these women were relatives of the of the Palestinian resistance fighters, thus placing them in an uncomfortable position. Out of this fear, the women described the male body as a victim- “wounded, broken, weak and dead” (p. 152). In contrast, the women described the female body in active terms and as a strong body- “working, providing, giving birth and breastfeeding” (p. 152). The Palestinian women pride themselves in having been able to re-establish family life and rebuilding the community. For Kassem, “this representation of the female body offers an alternative form of (non-violent) struggle, as well as an alternative image of heroism” (p. 152).

The last chapter explores the theme of home and how its meaning is not static. Home has multiple connotations in the Palestinian context and carries personal and collective meanings. The following is some of the way these women understood home: home as a social and spatial organizer, home as a target for attack, home as a burial site. These ideas of home are greatly shaped by the events of 1948. Home is a site for telling forbidden stories. The interviews were conducted in the women’s homes and often in the presence of other family members. Some of the family members would contribute to the women’s stories while others asked the women to elaborate on some of their stories. So the home remains a “site of commemoration that celebrates Palestinian history, heritage and culture” (p. 195).

It has been over sixty years since the 1948 war but it continues to affect these women like it happened just yesterday. Kassem’s book tells of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a different standpoint. Women are the pillars of society so when it is disrupted, they are at the centre of it. Their experience of the events will always be different to that of men so listening to them is just as (if not more) important. Their stories show a different sense of courage and sacrifice. Therefore, in addition to letting them tell history as they saw it, ‘Palestinian Women’ also rightfully celebrates and honours these women.