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Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation:
Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation
(review)

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Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin (eds.)
Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation:
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Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2002. 324 pp.

reviewed by Deborah Greniman

“Our lives as Palestinians . . . are very complex and worthy of sophisticated critical thinking,” writes Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (p. 190) in her contribution to this multivocal work. She has just related the chilling story, related by one of her students, of a 43-year-old Palestinian man, desperate for work in Israel, who was forced by Israeli soldiers to bark like a dog in front of his own son in order to win their acquiescence to his passage through a road-block. This juxtaposition is emblematic of the volume, which sets out to join poignant, often heart-rending personal narratives to the critical reflections of their Palestinian and Jewish Israeli women authors.

The editors, Nahla Abdo and Ronit, Lentin are surely successful in bearing out Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s description, in the sense that it would be hard to come away from this book without a much enriched understanding of the diversity among Palestinian women and the wide variation in their painful long-term experiences of the conflict with Israel. My sense, though, is that the volume is only partly successful in fulfilling her demand for sophisticated critical thinking, largely because of the overwhelming ideological solidarity among most of the contributors and between them and the editors. Moreover, force of circumstance—the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada when work on the collection was already underway—combined, perhaps, with a tendency to seek out Jewish contributors who fit with the volume’s general ideological tone, resulted in a Jewish section that seems more like an appendage. It is only half the size of the Palestinian section, and although the individual contributions are of great value, it is much less reflective of the diversity of Jewish Israeli women’s experience and the range of critical thinking about it.

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Truth to tell, I almost put aside this book on page 13, midway through the introduction, which consists of a series of lengthy, reflective e-mail communications between the co-editors from their respective places of exile—as they themselves put it—in Canada and the Irish Republic. Abdo describes an incident that took place during a conference on “Diversity among Women” sponsored by the Israel Association of Feminist and Gender Studies at Beit Berl College in February 2000, in which some participants tried to stop her from continuing a presentation in which she discussed her “experience . . . of living under a racist state.” Prefacing her account, Abdo writes: “I am amazed . . . by the notion that women who call themselves feminists—and some even are identified as progressive—are still so weak intellectually that they cannot shake off their own repression from within.” I was present at Beit Berl, and although I was not among those who attacked Abdo, these words seemed almost like a personal insult. Indeed, as the passage proceeds, it becomes clear that they are directed at Israeli feminists as a group—accused by Abdo of “ignorance and arrogance” for not coming out and declaring themselves anti-Zionist. Though the parallel between South African apartheid and Zionism may appear crystal clear to Abdo, trying to argue the point by belittling the intelligence of one’s purported adversary (though quite a few of those who were present at the conference accept many parts of Abdo’s critique) seems counterproductive and evasive.

Nevertheless, I found that I had much to gain, in both insight and information, from continuing to read. On the very next page, I was struck by a fuller understanding of Abdo’s experience (and that of other Palestinians) of her reception by pro-Israelis when trying to express her views from podiums in the West: Even before she begins to speak, she is rejected for what she represents, in a kind of mirror image of her own view of Zionist Israelis. To be sure, the situations of Jewish Israelis and Palestinians are not symmetrical, but the proposition expressed in the volume’s subtitle—that the lives of Palestinians and Israelis have all been shaped by the trauma and tragedy of dislocation, and that this experience has gendered as well as universal aspects—is a fruitful point of departure. Thus, the volume’s contributors are grouped by categories of dislocation—for the Palestinians, by the venues of their formative experiences, irrespective of the place of writing: “Exile in Lebanon”—in Beirut and in the camps; “Home as Exile”—in the State of Israel; and “Life under Occupation”—in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. By contrast, the categories used in the Jewish section are defined

by their members' current status and ideological standpoints: "Exile as Home"—Jewish Israelis who have, as it were, exiled themselves from their former locations (viewed by many Jews as *galut*, exile) to make their homes in Israel; "Exile as an Oppositional Locus"—those who have left that "home" for another place of exile; and "Existential States of Exile," a somewhat unclear category—since both its members, including co-editor Lentin, could have been placed in the second group—of writers who reflect from their exilic/diasporic standpoint upon the desirability and nature of nationalism in general and Zionism in particular.

All these narratives are based on direct personal experience of Israel/Palestine, but many of the authors write, like Abdo and Lentin themselves, from academic positions in the West. These locations are at once celebrated for the opportunities they offer for intellectual and personal growth and critiqued for their distance from the fate of the near and dear who remain in the Middle East. The Palestinian writers are well and articulately aware of the complex impact of the broad social changes wrought by the consequences of the 1948 war upon their personal lives, in terms of the breakdown of traditional family patterns and the opportunities and hardships this has presented to women. As Samia Costandi, who grew up and married in Lebanon but writes from Montreal, puts it:

This was not in the cards . . . my husband was not supposed to befriend another woman and leave me and my kids to suffer. . . . Yet in the writings of my North American sisters, I found an explanation for the oppression. . . . I am a feminist, a feminist, . . . a Palestinian Canadian feminist. (pp. 53–54)

The writers go beyond their own lives to subject the lives of other Palestinian women to the same kind of analysis, often using interview material or family stories going back two or three generations. Violence is a constant companion to dislocation in these narratives. Characteristically, it stokes global trends toward modernization and social fragmentation, and, consequently, toward gender-specific demands upon women to remain the bearers of traditional values. In the limited framework of this review, I can cite but a few well researched, keenly insightful examples. Rosemary Sayigh set out to track the little-studied subject of mother–daughter relationships among the Palestinian exiles in Lebanon. She found that these have been affected in contradictory

ways by, on the one hand, the breakdown of the traditional extended family and the greater availability (for those able to exploit them) of educational and occupational opportunities for girls, and, on the other, by the pressures to conform imposed by family loyalty, patriotism under fire, and women's longing for respect for themselves and their daughters—elsewhere described by Judy El-Bushra as one of the most widely expressed concerns of women in situations of conflict.¹ Shalhoub-Kevorkian discusses the unique dilemmas and hardships imposed by these pressures on two groups of women: the abused or oppressed traditional women she has studied and endeavored to help; and her own social work students in the territories, forced to cope with the social restrictions imposed upon women whose husbands are absent (in Israeli prisons) for extended periods. Interestingly, neither the Palestinian nor the Jewish narratives speak of outright sexual assault or the fear of it as a factor in the military confrontation, but Shalhoub-Kevorkian's is one of the few essays to discuss explicitly the effect of the conflict upon Palestinian women's sexuality.

The articles in the section devoted to Palestinian women who grew up in post-1948 Israel convey the bitterness of coming of age in a state that denies many of its native-born citizens both the right to call it their own and some basic amenities—decent schooling, housing, jobs, parks to play in—that would derive from that right. Nevertheless, here, too, there is also the tang of breaking loose—often at great personal cost—from traditional family patterns, for the sake of study and of political and feminist involvement. That process often reaches its first peak in Israeli universities, where the writers experience both overt discrimination and an opening to critical thought, spurring passionate critique of the Israeli and Palestinian social frameworks in which they live and work.

Throughout the Palestinian section, Israeli Jews—apart from a small group of radical feminists and peace activists—appear mainly as harsh stereotypes, often from the other side of a jackboot. There is no escaping the relentless conviction that Zionism is racism and Zionist society is racist, a theme often picked up in the Jewish section as well and elaborated by both editors in their introduction. Zionism is portrayed monolithically in terms of dominant political, social, and military trends manifested in Israel, notwithstanding the numerous streams of Zionist and post-Zionist thought that are available for analysis in both original works and secondary literature. As a result, the ideological meanings of Zionism and, conversely, anti-Zionism, are more or

less taken for granted and not explained, though one is given to understand that the latter relates to a stand against nationalism in general, partially overridden, on Abdo's side only, by the felt need to allow Palestinians to determine their own fate.

This criticism might seem beside the point in a book that is devoted largely to giving voice to Palestinian women, were it not for the editors' demand of the Jewish reader that s/he reject Zionism in order to come to terms with that voice. Since it was Zionism (either their own or someone else's) that brought most Jews to Israel and led to the establishment of the state, readers may experience that demand as a delegitimization not only of the Jewish character of the state, which the authors clearly do intend, but of their very presence in Israel. This is likely to arouse fear and hostility rather than cooperation toward resolving the enormous oppression, patriarchal and political, described in these pages.

For this reason, I was very glad of Alice Shalvi's contribution, in which she describes her experience as a refugee from Nazi Germany and the anti-Semitism she consequently encountered in England. Hers is the only essay to convey some idea of the oppressions and aspirations that might have moved humanistically oriented Jews to want to establish a state and settle in it. Shalvi describes her efforts to reach back into her memory of what it was to be a refugee in order to create a space where dialogue between Palestinians and Jews becomes possible.

Other Jewish contributors, lacking that first-person experience of the pre-state period, focus more on their awakenings to the oppressions inherent in the state's *de facto* treatment of Palestinians and in its dominant patriarchal social patterns. For four of these seven writers, Nira Yuval-Davis, Ella Habiba Shohat, Esther Fuchs, and Ronit Lentin, those awakenings contributed to their difficult choice of voluntary self-exile from Israel. Yuval-Davis, for example, describes the "paradise" she found as a child swimming around the deserted beach at Tantura—which crumbled when she heard at first hand the story of its former inhabitants, who were brutally expelled from their homes in 1948. Shohat, an Iraqi Jew, protests the rejection by dominant forces in Israel's cultural and educational frameworks of her community's Arab cultural background. By contrast, Shalvi, Rela Mazali, and Gila Svirsky, who spent at least part of their formative years in English-speaking countries, chose the opposite path, of settling or remaining in Israel and immersing themselves in its society as intimate, outspoken critics.

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Perhaps it would have been asking too much of the editors, given their overt political orientations, to include in this section the voices of Israeli women, born or raised in the country, who might have provided more of a counterpoint to these critical Jewish and Palestinian voices. It is reasonable to suppose, moreover, that the failure to include such accounts was not entirely that of the authors, as many self-defined Zionist women would have been reticent about including themselves in a volume so critical of Zionism. This lack reflects the view still held by so many Jews and Palestinians that their narratives are mutually exclusive, that allowing for one will delegitimize the other to the point of utter annihilation.

Many years ago, I read, in its Hebrew version, Raymonda Tawil's *My Home: My Prison* (written in the 1970s, long before she ever dreamed of becoming Yasser Arafat's mother-in-law). That book was an early expression of some of the same trends depicted in this one, particularly the disparate effects of westernization on the author as a Palestinian woman seeking at once to demonstrate her loyalty to traditional society and to critique it from the point of view of modern notions of liberation. Notwithstanding its sharp criticism of Israeli policies, Tawil's narrative was graced with accounts of the writer's interactions with Jewish Israelis, depicted in their human fullness and complexity. As a result, it gave me an almost paradoxical sense of optimism; it left room to hope for a society in which Palestinians and Jews might one day live together and enrich each other. In this volume, sadly, that hope seems to have diminished, particularly with the outbreak of hostilities in October 2000. I could wish that many Jewish Israelis, particularly feminist women, might hear the articulate, moving Palestinian and Jewish voices expressed in this volume; yet, for the reasons I have described, it is unlikely to gain many sympathetic readers in Israel. We can only hope for a future change in ambience that will allow ears and hearts to open to one another, leading to the emergence of a truly tolerant, just society of Israelis and Palestinians.

Note

1. See Judy El-Bushra, "Transforming Conflict: Some Thoughts on a Gendered Understanding of Conflict Processes," in Susie Jacobs, Ruth Jacobson, and Jennifer Marchbank (eds.), *States of Conflict: Gender, Violence and Resistance* (London-New York: Zed Books, 2000), pp. 66–86.