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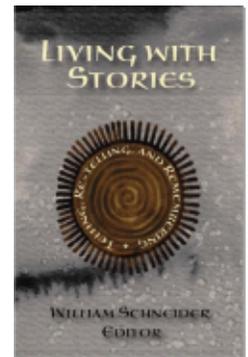
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The Representation of Politics and the Politics of Representation

Historicizing Palestinian Women's Narratives

Sherna Berger Gluck

Sherna Gluck is an historian and founder of the Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive at California State University at Long Beach. She is an active member of the Oral History Association and the International Oral History Association. In this essay, she describes her research on the role of women during the first Palestinian *intifada* and the evolution of a Palestinian women's movement. Discovering that the story differs with each telling, she questions how the political climate at the time influences what gets emphasized in any particular recounting of the past.

Introduction

As oral historians, we often admonish novices not to reinterview people whose narratives have been recorded already; or if they do, to read the previous oral histories and not to cover the same ground. On the other hand, as we increasingly problematize oral histories and analyze the various factors that shape narrators' representations, this advice might prove, instead, to be antihistorical. Realizing that people's representations will change depending not only on their own personal developments but also on the changing sociopolitical contexts in which the interview is conducted, can we assume that a narrative is more than merely a very transitory

representation? On the other hand, if the same questions are explored at different periods of time with the same narrators, might we be in a better position to make these transitory representations more historically meaningful—or least, more comprehensible?

The high visibility of women during the first Palestinian *intifada* (1987–1993) attracted a host of feminist scholars and activists to the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), many of whom recorded interviews with women leaders.¹ Most of the narratives collected in this period, like those recorded before the *intifada*, were primarily with urban activists and intellectuals—and frequently were with the same people. So, too, are the memoirs subsequently written by Palestinian women.² The origin story of the contemporary women’s movement figures prominently in these narratives and served as the basis for a general consensus that the women’s committees—or at least their leadership—to varying degrees came to embrace feminism in the course of the *intifada*. Was this, indeed, a transformation in their consciousness? An exploration of the “retellings” of their movement’s history and activism, including a discussion of the development of their feminist consciousness, provides an opportunity to consider how the changing political context might have shaped the production of their narratives.

To explore the varying representations of political events and consciousness, as well as the way that the shifting political situation influenced these representations, I will draw on a host of these different narratives. These include my own repeated interviews collected over a period of almost six years (1989–94); the 1985–86 interviews conducted by Orayb Najjar, the 1985 interviews conducted by Joost Hilterman, and the 1995 interviews conducted by Frances Hasso with both men and women of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). An unpublished 1993 memoir of Fadwa al-Labadi, a former DFLP cadre is also very revealing (al-Labadi 1993). Unfortunately, most of these other interviews were not available at the time I began my work, or the identity of the narrators was disguised—an argument, I suppose, against anonymity.³ To understand the various contexts in which the “retellings” occurred, it is critical to understand the political developments in the Palestinian national movement and women’s historic roles.

Palestinian Nationalism and Women’s Historic Roles

December 9, 1987, marks the beginning of what is now identified as the first *intifada*, the popular uprising against Israeli occupation of

the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza. It was sparked by an auto accident in Jabalya refugee camp outside of Gaza City in which an Israeli driver struck and injured four Palestinians. Initially local, over the next several weeks, actions against the Israeli occupation spread to the West Bank, and eventually the entire Palestinian population in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) was mobilized into a largely nonviolent, mass popular movement (Gluck 1994). The television images of older women in traditional clothing engaged in street demonstrations, including stone throwing, was the more public face of women's role to the outside world. Behind the walls, however, their role was even more critical. Among other activities, they organized underground classes when the schools were closed, monitored their neighborhoods to ensure that all families were getting adequate nutrition, developed small-scale economic projects, and worked with the various committees that had been formed to establish health clinics.

Women's organized nationalist activities were not new. They date back to 1921 when the Palestinian Women's Union was organized to improve the standards of living of the poor and organize women around national activities. Six years later, during the convening of the First Arab Women's Congress in Jerusalem, delegates met with the British High Commissioner to protest Zionist immigration and the Balfour Declaration.⁴ Women also played critical—but often invisible—support roles during the 1936–39 revolt against British rule. During the Arab-Israeli war in 1948–49 following Israel's declaration of independence, and again in 1967 during the Israeli invasion of the West Bank and Gaza, they provided invaluable assistance to the fleeing Palestinian refugees.

Although these earlier activities of women's volunteer organizations were confined largely to women of the elite, they did lay a foundation for women's activism. In fact, women of the earlier generation, particularly those who formed organizations to support the refugees in 1948, provided the training ground for many of the leaders of the later Palestinian women's movement. These contemporary leaders were part of the new generation of young Palestinian university students who had been raised under Israeli occupation. Their activism, which was initially spurred by nationalism and class consciousness, ultimately fomented a nascent feminist consciousness. Consequently, although the many of the activities during the first *intifada* were designed primarily to help sustain the largely nonviolent uprising against Israeli occupation,



Women's Action Committee ceramic workshop, Issawiyeh, 1989.

they took on a life of their own and became an avenue for women's empowerment. This was particularly the case for the women's economic cooperatives that were formed in the countryside and refugee camps.

Origin Stories

To explore the varying representations of feminist consciousness, we must look at the ways that political affiliation, generation, and the dating of a narrative influence historical rendition. Regardless of their political affiliation or ideological bent, it is significant that all women activists begin their origin story with the 1978 formation of the Working Women's Committee. And of those who were in the Occupied Palestinian Territories at the time—and out of jail—*all*

claim to have attended the founding meeting. The accounts of two leading Democratic Front (DFLP) party cadres recorded in the 1980s sound remarkably similar. For instance, in 1985, Siham Barghouti explained:

We began to suspect that we were following the wrong approach by having mixed work parties [in the Voluntary Work Committees], and we needed to work only with women. So we tried to work with existing women's organizations. . . . but we felt uneasy about the way traditional women's societies function. . . . We felt that there was a need for a more broad-based women's organization, with no age limit, one in which decisions were not formulated from the top down. . . . We published an open letter inviting women to join us. Between fifteen to twenty women responded on March 8, 1978, and the Women's Work [Committees] . . . was born. (Najjar 1992:127).

Except for a difference in head counts, Zahera Kamal's description four years later did not stray far from Barghouti's:

Many of us, we were in charitable societies. . . . We had a discussion . . . about twenty-five or thirty women . . . we had an idea that this is the work we should [be doing]. We have to change the role of woman in the society, and if we want to do that, we should have other kinds of work. . . . And in 1978 we started a committee . . . that could have all the women . . . it wasn't concerned with just one party.⁵

Not surprisingly, for security reasons, neither Kamal nor Barghouti discuss their membership in the Democratic Front (DFLP) and the central role that DFLP women cadres played in the formation of the committee, though Barghouti does hint at a vague "organizational we." And even though Kamal and Barghouti both imply that the women themselves were the force behind the process, there is an emotional flatness in their accounts, in sharp contrast to each of their descriptions of their own very early feminist awakenings.⁶ By contrast, Fadwa al-Labadi, their DFLP contemporary who penned her memoirs in 1993 after a rather ugly split in the party, was more willing to open old wounds and to expose the extent to which the male DFLP leadership was the force behind the organizing of the first women's committee:

In 1977, we [the women members of the Voluntary Work Committee (VWC)] saw the need to involve more women in our group, especially from the poorer segments of society. Soon we became active in trying to mobilize women. The main aim was to take part in the national struggle . . . [and we] could also raise the consciousness of their situation in



A demonstration of women activists, 1991.

society that discriminated against them. . . . Our leaders [in the DFLP] told women members to mobilize into the VWC and then to recruit them into the political party. . . . The reason that most of the women were reluctant to join the VWC was because it had mixed membership. . . . We discussed this issue with our leaders, who redirected us to cooperate with the women's charitable societies. . . .

We wanted a radically new approach to working among women—an approach geared to development rather than to charity, to empowerment rather than dependency. (al-Labadi 1993:49)

Ten years after her interview quoted earlier, and after the split in the party, Barghouti was also more willing to name the DFLP as the organizational “we” to which she had alluded earlier.⁷ Labadi goes further, not only exposing the central, manipulative role of the male leadership but also pointing to the fact that the women's and men's agendas differed:

Many left-wing male members opposed our new establishment and accused us of separatism; their justification was that mixed organizations are the best for women's emancipation. In reality they wanted women to continue to be subjected to male domination. (Hasso 1997:50)

The downplaying of their own feminist agenda by the older, then-loyal DFLP party members contrasts with a younger cohort who also attended the founding meeting. Regardless of their differing political affiliations, these younger activists describe coming to the group in terms that reflected a dawning feminist consciousness, no matter how it was labeled at the time. At the very least, as one activist from Hebron suggested in a 1985 interview, it was a way of claiming space for a new generation of women activists (Hilterman 1985:132).

To Be or Not To Be: Representations of Feminist Consciousness

It is not surprising to hear differing accounts of the same event from different participants and, indeed, different ascriptions of meaning. And we are certainly accustomed to narrators engaging in less subterfuge as their political loyalties shift. Multiple interviews done over a ten-year period with the same set of women leaders makes it possible to go even further and to explore how the changing political climate, rather than just an individual's changing political alliances, shaped their representations of feminist consciousness.

Initially relying on our own interviews done over the course of the *intifada*, observers of the women's movement from both inside and outside the OPT, and quite independent of each other, reached an early consensus about the evolving feminist commitment of the various women's committees—or at least what was perceived as a growing tendency not to privilege nationalism over feminism. I certainly drew that conclusion, for instance, from the repeat interviews that I conducted from early 1989 to mid-1994 with Maha Nassar, the leader of the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC)—the committee that other local activists viewed as the most resistant to embracing feminism (see, for instance, Strum 1992:219).

Indeed, by the time we conversed in 1991, Nassar's unhesitant espousal of feminism seemed a far cry from our first interview in January 1989. Then, the tension created by trying to toe the nationalist line while simultaneously espousing women's liberation yielded a rather ambivalent and equivocal response when I asked if her organization could be considered feminist:

We are women liberation movements. . . . We believe that our liberation cannot be achieved fully unless our society is liberated. . . . The most oppressed sector of the society are women. That's why it doesn't mean that we have to stop our liberation for ourselves until the liberation for



Union of Palestinian Women's Committees canning project, Saer, 1991.

the society is achieved. It means that we will have to go on both sides; to make our activities . . . all together to make—our nation. To end occupation and to have our independent state.⁸

The change from this interview to my final meeting with Nassar in 1994 seemed complete and was reinforced by the barrage of excited phone calls she was receiving during our visit about her rumored establishment of a woman's shelter in her home.

Using the early *intifada* years as our starting point, and comparing the narratives collected from the 1987–89 period with those of the later years, our initial conclusions about a transformation in feminist consciousness seemed warranted. However, going back to even earlier narratives that eventually became available and taking a closer historical reading, this conclusion becomes suspect.



Kufr Nameh village activists, 1991.

Instead, we see that women's issues, which are viewed as potentially divisive, are more severely circumscribed when there is greater pressure for political unity and especially for inter- and intra-factional national unity. For example, the period of the *intifada*, which Ted Swedenburg (1995) characterizes as one of national conformism, stands in sharp contrast to 1985, when the rapprochement among the various factions of the PLO had not been realized. This earlier pre-*intifada* period happens to be precisely when Joost Hiltermann conducted his interviews with women activists, in which an unnamed leader of the UPWC (who I could later identify as Maha Nassar) definitively proclaimed:

We place the women's question before the national question. We focus all our activities on bringing the women out of their homes to make them more self-confident and independent. Once they believe in themselves, they will know that they can become leaders in any field they choose, including the military field. (Hilterman 1991:168)

It is a mistake, too, to view the *intifada* years as if they represented a coherent, undifferentiated era. Rather, there were shifts between what Arturo Escobar, in speaking of Latin America, refers to as the logic of “popular” struggle and the logic of “democratic” struggle (1992:40). The former is characterized by a unified political space, whereas the latter flowers in a plural space—exactly the kind of space that frees women to subscribe to antipatriarchal politics.

By 1991, with the beginning of U.S. shuttle diplomacy, and especially by 1994 with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the fragile national unity that characterized the earlier “popular struggle” period of the *intifada* broke down and the pressure for national conformism dissipated. Consequently, the leaders of the oppositionist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)-aligned UPWC shifted their discourse. Where they had been rather equivocal in their early *intifada* narratives, in this later period they once again became more willing to espouse feminism openly and to be self-critical of the way they had privileged the nationalist struggle. While issues like wife battering and sexual abuse (including incest) might have been addressed privately and secretly earlier, they were being brought to the surface and made public. A study by the Women’s Studies Division of the Bisan Centre that revealed an unexpected high rate of incest helped to spur these discussions. Three years later, when I visited with Maha Nassar, she was at the center of a firestorm in the local community for having given refuge to a young woman attempting to flee a forced marriage.

The increasingly self-critical discourse of women’s movement leaders, coupled with the loss of funds to maintain most of the grassroots projects that had empowered ordinary women, led some observers to reverse their earlier optimistic assessments. Instead, they concluded that the situation for women had worsened; that the space opened up during the *intifada* had proved to be fruitless. And although my closer reading and greater contextualization of the narratives of urban intellectual and political women has forced me, too, to reassess the impact of the *intifada*, we must take care not to render invisible the experiences of grassroots activists in villages and camps. My repeated interviews with them reveal how the “free space” opened during the early days of the *intifada* helped to spawn a feminist consciousness among them as well—even though this space may have closed in the post-*intifada* years (Gluck 1994, 1990).

Furthermore, the assessment of either “regression” in feminist consciousness or the earlier “progression” fails to acknowledge how the fluctuations in the unity of the national movement variously impacted women’s ability to negotiate the terrain—what I have alluded to elsewhere as being like shifting sands (Gluck 1997). In other words, when the various narratives are historicized, it becomes evident that there was not a change in the feminist consciousness of women’s committee leaders. Rather, their ability to maneuver and act on this consciousness was sometimes more constrained than at other times, depending on the moment of the national struggle and the extent of unity. This in turn determined how they *represented* their consciousness at different historical moments over this ten-year time span.

Reflections on the Post-*Intifada* (One) Feminism–Nationalism Conundrum

By 1994, following the return of Yasir Arafat (Abu Amar) and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leaders from exile, the first *intifada* was all but dead. The popular mass mobilization that had spawned a more participatory process and created a more open political environment was replaced with a return of a bureaucratic and patriarchal political climate and structure. Feminists eventually labeled this the rule of the *abus*, referring to the older patriarchal leaders who had all adopted *noms de guerre* with the Abu designation.⁹ Although the PLO leaders from Tunisia and their contingent of police and soldiers were initially welcomed with open arms by much of the population, the honeymoon did not last. The long-standing simmering struggle for power between the “inside” (those in the OPT) and the “outside” (the exiled leaders in Tunisia)—and particularly between a new generation of leaders inside who had cut their eye teeth during the *intifada*—surfaced very quickly. To mobilize support, Arafat relied on the old clan structure, thus reinforcing the patriarchal basis of the society that had been undermined during the first *intifada*. As a result, instead of mobilizing support for the newly formed Palestinian Authority, Arafat and his loyalists from the outside fostered widespread opposition among the democratic forces that had developed inside the OPT. Their active challenges revived the kind of open spaces created during the *intifada* and fostered the rejuvenation of feminist organizing (Gluck 1995). It also led to a great deal of discussion and self-criticism of having given primacy to nationalism over feminism (Kuttab 1999). Even

women who were formerly Fateh and Arafat loyalists agreed and joined with the opposition voices—at least on a women’s agenda. Indeed, women mobilized across political factions when full equality was not guaranteed on the first draft of the Basic Law (the temporary constitution) issued in late 1993. Although their unified challenges led to improvements in the third draft, it was still not fully satisfactory.

While the women’s movement leaders of the *intifada* days persisted in fighting for a women’s agenda, joined by a new generation of women activists, the shift away from grassroots organizing that I had observed by 1994 became definitive. Instead, the phenomena identified as the “NGO-ization” of the women’s movement led to increasingly specialized and professional work which, by and large, reflected the agendas of the donor agencies (Jad 2003; Kuttab 2006). Even the language shifted: gender consciousness was becoming the coin of the realm in the NGO world.

One can only surmise how the women’s movement leaders of the first *intifada* would represent their feminist history and consciousness in a retelling today, and even what terminology they might use. Would the open spaces created by opposition to the rule of the *abus* promote a representation of a greater feminist consciousness and an unwillingness to subsume it under the nationalist struggle? Or will the recent (2006) victory of the Islamic forces in the Palestinian elections, along with renewed attacks by Israel, create a pressure for women to downplay their feminism and promote the primacy of nationalism and secular unity? However these new retellings might be framed, they can only be understood by grasping the dynamics of the new social and political developments.

Notes

1. All references to the *intifada* in this paper refer to what subsequently has to be viewed as the first *intifada*. A second *intifada* started in 2000 following the visit by Ariel Sharon to Haram Al Sharif (known in English as the Dome of the Rock).
2. Interviews from the *intifada* period are included in a host of articles and books, cited below. I am indebted to Frances Hasso who so generously gave me access to some of her interviews. The earlier interviews conducted by Joost Hilterman (1985) provided a basis for comparative analysis of the *pre-intifada* and *intifada* representations of feminist consciousness. These were quoted extensively in his doctoral dissertation, later published under the title *Behind the Intifada* (1991). Finally, Orayb Najjar’s early interviews were published later in her book, *Portraits of Palestinian Women* (1992).

3. These interviews were conducted as early as 1985 but did not become available until they were published later. Although I was able to later identify some of the anonymous narrators, I did not have a basis for these judgements in the earlier phases of my research.
4. This refers to the declaration by Lord Balfour in 1917 of British support “for the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”
5. Interview conducted by Sherna Berger Gluck, January 1989.
6. For Kamal’s background, see Sherna Berger Gluck (1994); the most detailed background account of Barghouti’s early years can be found in Najjar’s *Portraits of Palestinian Women* (1992).
7. See Frances Hasso’s “Paradoxes of Gender/Politics: Nationalism, Feminism and Modernity in Contemporary Palestine” (1997), esp. chapters 3–4. Her dissertation research was recently published as *Resistance, Repression and Gender Politics in Occupied Palestine and Jordan* (2005).
8. Gluck interview, January 1989, Tape IA2–3.
9. *Abu* literally means father and was a traditional naming convention, with both men and women both being named for their first son; *Umm* for the mother and *Abu* for the father, e.g., Abu Khaled, Umm Khaled. The older generation of PLO leaders adopted *noms de guerre* using the designation of Abu, though the name they chose to accompany it was more symbolic, e.g. Abu Jihad. Yasir Arafat was known as Abu Amar.

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