

REVIEW ARTICLE

Palestinian Women and the Right to Rights

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Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East: A Palestinian Case Study by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Cambridge University Press, 2009 ISBN 978-0-521-70879-1

In this book, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, a senior lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem Faculty of Law's Institute of Criminology and a Palestinian Israeli citizen living in Jerusalem, presents a compelling account of the experiences of Palestinian women living under Israeli occupation and the various types of violence they encounter in their everyday lives, as well as the ways in which women transform their victimisation into agency to resist this violence. Shalhoub-Kevorkian brings a wealth of direct experience to examining her subject. She has spent over 15 years working with women and children facing abuse, mothers of martyrs, female relatives of political prisoners, victims of house demolitions and other types of political violence. Through the voices of these women, the author makes an important contribution to our understanding of the complex and intersecting causes of violence against women, including the silencing of women's voices through discourses of orientalism, colonialism, cultural authenticity, militarism and security, as well as identifying the failure of multiple actors, not least of all the international community to address this violence.

The author terms Palestinian women 'frontliners' in that they are both victims of violence and warriors resisting violence with all the means they have. Violence perpetrated by the Israeli occupation includes the imprisonment or killing of relatives, the destruction of homes, harassment at checkpoints, destruction of olive trees (a significant source of income and survival), the separation of Palestinians from one another and from their land, their schools, their workplaces, amongst many other examples, following the construction of the wall. 'Occupying the material space of the frontline, these women must often carry the burdens of the outcome of the fighting. These women survive both the daily assaults against their quotidian activities and the psychological warfare that is endemic to a militarized zone. By bringing the voices of these frontliners to the forefront of my work, I hope to reveal the unseen and unrecognized agency of these women'.¹

This book is not the first to tell of the violence perpetrated against Palestinian women. For example, a 2005 report by Amnesty International provides documented evidence of the negative impact of Israel's occupation and militarization of the conflict on Palestinian women, including women in labour being prevented passage through checkpoints to reach a hospital, women losing their agricultural work due to the confiscation of land, girls being prevented from attending school, ill-treatment of Palestinian women in Israeli detention centres, women losing their homes and their belongings due to house demolitions ... as well as violence perpetrated by some Palestinian men, including domestic violence, discrimination and so-called honour killings.² However, Shalhoub-

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Kevorkian is the first to systematically identify the structural sources of this violence as well as documenting the agency of Palestinian women in resisting the multiple sources of violence. Moreover, she is attentive to the structural imbalances of power between occupier and occupied that play out in the space of gender relations.

The stories that the author tells about the lives of the women she has met are not unusual. These are not stories of women going to demonstrations or involved in other types of political work. These are stories about mothers cooking dinner for their families, young women getting married, girls going to school, and other daily activities. Yet, continuing to do these ordinary activities becomes politicized in a context of military occupation, where the boundaries between private and public are constantly blurred. Israeli soldiers force their way into homes, homes are demolished, land is confiscated, mobility is prevented, in the name of Israeli security. Shalhoub-Kevorkian compares the daily violation of human rights under Israeli occupation and the confinement of Palestinians to enclaves within the West Bank (as well as the blockaded Gaza Strip) to 'an extended concentration camp, as being an instance of what Agamben has called homo sacer, or "bare life"'.³

Shalhoub-Kevorkian is not the only person to build on Giorgio Agamben's work to understand what is happening in Palestine.⁴ As Honaida Ghanim has argued, the Occupied Palestinian Territories is a 'space of exception' in contrast to the 'normal space' of Israel. 'The Separation Wall has become a master signifier, marking the difference between the two opposite spaces [...] Constructing these physical and symbolic boundaries demarcates boundaries between one kind of people, who, due to their culture and values, can expand their biological existence into a political and social existence, and another kind of people, who, by their very essence and due to the barbarian position they continue to inhabit, cannot be eligible for a political supplement that will include them in the polis, thus expanding their existence beyond the biological'.⁵ Neve Gordon, theorising Israeli occupation since the second Intifada, similarly argues, 'as it redeployed troops in the West Bank and Gaza and disabled the PA, Israel did not reinstate any disciplinary forms of control and refused to reassume the role of managing the population's lives. Instead, Israel emphasized a series of controlling practices informed by a type of sovereign power, which have functioned less through the instatement of the law and more through the law's suspension. Israel now operates primarily by destroying the most vital social securities and by reducing members of Palestinian society to what Giorgio Agamben has called homo sacer, people whose lives can be taken with impunity'.⁶ The Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip in early 2009 and the failure of the US and UK to hold Israel to account for the crimes it committed, is an extreme example of how Palestinian lives are taken with impunity. Yet, Kevorkian-Shalhoub's book illustrates how this impunity occurs on a daily basis and its implications for people beyond the statistics of numbers of dead and wounded.

Despite the abuses of human rights in the Occupied Territories, the author problematizes recourse to human rights language, which can just as often be a source of repression as a source of empowerment for Palestinians. 'The asymmetries of power between and within states, nations, and groups become highlighted as we invoke the various arenas of women's and human rights discourses'.⁷ Drawing on the observations of post-colonial feminist lawyers, such as Sherene Razack, of the ability of Third World women to make human rights claims internationally, Shalhoub-Kevorkian argues, 'it seems that it is only through the use of imperialistic and orientalist discourse that women outside the West are able to claim their rights. This approach results not only in the keeping of the exotic Orientalized woman at the margins, but more importantly in increasing their

vulnerability—such as women living in conflict zones’.⁸ Universal human rights are held up as a panacea to the ills of Third World women, yet, by invoking ‘universality’, Shalhoub-Kevorkian asks whether the international community ignores history, contingency, and the context of women in conflict zones.⁹

The insecurities and abuses experienced by Palestinian women as women are related to ‘the way nationalist discourses constitute the female body *as a way to claim it for an imagined national body*’.¹⁰ This renders women’s bodies vulnerable to ‘weaponisation’—a term used by several women interviewed by the author. The concept of the weaponization of Palestinian women’s bodies refers not to female suicide bombers but to ‘the ways in which patriarchal forces use women’s bodies as weapons in their wars or conflicts’.¹¹ Incidents of weaponisation include Israeli soldiers using Palestinian women as human shields and Israeli soldiers threatening Palestinian women with rape and harassment when passing through Israeli checkpoints. A brief examination of a practice called ‘*isqat*’, meaning ‘downfall’, illustrates how women’s bodies have been used as weapons against the Palestinian national struggle with implications not only for particular women victims but for gender relations within Palestinian society. *Isqat* refers to the sexual abuse of Palestinian women to extract ‘security information’ for the Israeli military and secret service. As the author explains, *isqat* is clearly contrary to the human rights of those women who find themselves the victims of abuse and harassment. Yet, the meaning of the term goes beyond the experience of the individual concerned. It was ‘meant to show the way military powers used patriarchal perceptions of sexuality and honour to put down and ‘defeat’ individual women and their families personally, socially, and politically’.¹² Consequently, ‘women’s bodies served as a powerful weapon against themselves but also against Palestinian males who are always already positioned, by virtue of their struggle against occupation, to stand in for the nation. Thus, the use of Palestinian women to prevent the realization of a Palestinian “nation” positions gender, particularly in the figure of the gendered citizen, within the struggle for nationhood.’¹³

The weaponisation of women’s bodies, rather than helping to dismantle patriarchal views of gender relations, instead strengthens such views. In response to the practice of *isqat*, Shalhoub-Kevorkian relates how the Palestinian authorities have viewed sexual abuse (whoever the perpetrator) as a ‘national security’ issue, making it difficult for women to talk about cases of sexual abuse happening within Palestinian society.¹⁴ For, to speak up about such abuse appears to go against the national struggle and to become complicit with those outside forces that seek to destroy the Palestinian nation. Between the violence of the occupier and the resistance of the occupied, a Palestinian woman’s body is no longer her own but is a symbol of cultural authenticity, of the Palestinian nation. Like other conflicts—from the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, to the genocide in Rwanda, to the war between the US military and Iraqi insurgent forces—women’s bodies are the battlefields.

As symbols of the nation which must be protected from the occupiers, Palestinian women are tasked with safeguarding their ‘honour’—referring to their modesty but more generally to their compliance with patriarchy. As the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women said of Palestine: ‘This is [] where two systems of subordination—occupation and patriarchy—converge in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: women in confronting the former submit to the latter’.¹⁵ This dialectical relation between resistance and accommodation is illustrated by the story of Khulood, a Palestinian mother of three (male) children, who told the author about her father: ‘What a life ... we women – our honour, our biological reproductivity –became the only weapon for men to yitsalahou fiyu

[weaponize themselves with]... to protect themselves. So, the fact that I got married early, that I was honourable [she meant a virgin] when I got married, that I got pregnant right away ... that I got him a grandson ... is the only way to prove that he is a man. My father is all that we have left—for me and my sisters—in such hard conditions; I wish we could give him more’ (p. 120, author’s additions).¹⁶

Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s writings, not only in this book but previously, reject the ‘culturalization’ of violence against women (that is, the explanation of violence as part of ‘Palestinian culture’) and situate it within the context of Israeli occupation, militarization, dispossession and poverty. She recognises that there has been a tendency amongst some Palestinian activists to diminish the importance of violence against women perpetrated by Palestinians in order not to ‘empower the Western imperialist discourse and further culturalize [Palestinian violence against women] ...’.¹⁷ However, the author sees Israeli occupation and Palestinian violence against Palestinian women as integrally linked. For example, the Israeli military occupation authorities allow Palestinian tribal heads to issue death certificates, which can be used to hide so-called honour crimes. Israeli military checkpoints cut off roads between Palestinian villages and towns, isolating women from friends and family and making them more vulnerable to patriarchal control. The Israeli military and occupation authorities routinely humiliate Palestinian men, making it difficult for Palestinian women to talk about their own experiences of violence.

Despite the depressing evidence of violence against women in Palestine, Shalhoub-Kevorkian emphasizes that Palestinian women are not only victims but that they are actively resisting violence through the construction of ‘counter-spaces’. This is the ability of Palestinian women to create agency within militarized spaces and, thereby, to break down the dichotomy of the dominant discourses that silence Palestinian women. For example, when women and girls are forced to wait at an Israeli checkpoint, prevented from reaching their schools, their places of work and their hospitals, and they get out their school books to study, breastfeed their children and talk back to the Israeli soldier, this is a type of resistance—for, the Israeli occupation seeks to constrain Palestinian education, prevent ‘normal’ social reproduction, silence the occupied. Palestinian women’s location at the intersection of local patriarchy, militarized occupation and Western domination is not only a cause of their oppression but also a source of their agency and resistance. The author argues, ‘The analysis of women’s resistance and agency in this book leads us to the realization that both the dynamic and the expression of this resistance and agency can only be understood if we examine the ways in which women come to negotiate the various masculinities that enfold them both locally and globally. This negotiation is part of their ontological “betweenness”’.¹⁸

In addition to presenting a vivid picture of the lives of Palestinian women living under occupation, the author intends that the voices of the women heard in this book constitute a process of knowledge production that provides a source for constructing new types of feminisms. As the author states, ‘... focusing on the voices of Palestinian women reveals the ways in which their exilic status formed out of the betweenness that I have been describing does not address or partake of the “universalities” of women’s victimization. Instead, the voices of these women emphasize the particular victimization of Palestinian women and the neglected agency that arises out of the ashes of that victimization’.¹⁹ In so doing, this book challenges discourses of liberal empire, which seek to ‘save brown women from brown men’ (as the postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak described colonialism) in the name of universal human rights, whilst simultaneously leaving intact structures of foreign occupation and militarized aggression that enable the daily abuse of human dignity.

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- ¹ Shalhoub-Kevorkian (under review) 5.
- ² Amnesty International, *Israel: Conflict, occupation and patriarchy: Women carry the burden* (London, Amnesty International, 2005) 36.
- ³ Shalhoub-Kevorkian (under review) 117.
- ⁴ Agamben, G. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Stanford University Press. 1998).
- ⁵ Ghanim, H. Thanatopolitics, 'Colonial Occupation in Palestine', in R. Lentin ed. *Thinking Palestine* (London, Zed: 2008) 71.
- ⁶ Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley, University of California Press 2008) 21.
- ⁷ Shalhoub-Kevorkian (under review) 106.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid. 107.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. 85, author's emphasis.
- ¹¹ Ibid. 113.
- ¹² Ibid. 15.
- ¹³ Ibid. 87.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 88.
- ¹⁵ Amnesty International, 4.
- ¹⁶ IS THIS FROM THE AMNESTY REPORT OR THE BOOK UNDER REVIEW?
- ¹⁷ Shalhoub-Kevorkian (under review), 64.
- ¹⁸ Ibid 202.
- ¹⁹ Ibid 203-4.