**Transmission of the Al-Nakba through Three Generations of Palestinian Women**

*Samah Saleh*

**Introduction**

Palestinians have been living under the Israeli occupation since 1948. Their struggle with the occupation shapes the landscape of nationhood, borders, boundaries and territory in which they live. It also shapes subjects and the ways in which they negotiate the restrictions on the practices of everyday life. Under these conditions, women are not just unaffected witnesses; they are deeply impacted by the national struggle and take roles within it, even if these roles are not acknowledged or recognized by the community. These roles reflect *sumud*, especially when women bear the hardship of the political situation and the brunt of the Israeli attacks.In this presentation I am going to discuss how the experience of the Palestinian catastrophe in 1948 (Al-Nakba) influenced Palestinian women and has been transmitted through generations. I will focus on how the nostalgic images of the stolen land among women, which were built based on their mothers’ or grandmothers’ stories, can create anger, and how the feeling of loss is transmitted to build the political subjecthood for women – that is risking their lives by deciding to join military groups and the political imprisonment that has followed.

**Methodology**

In studies of Al- Nakba women have been absent “except when they are mentioned in relation to issues of honour, fashion and clothing, which in turn demonstrates women’s status as objects (and not subjects) of cultural norms” (Hammami, 2004 cited in Kassem, 2011:4). So when we discuss Palestinian women’s narratives of Al-Nakba, we find that their narratives have been rarely documented.As May (2001) argues, when women are considered in social life, they are characterized as passive and emotional. On this absente,Kassem (2011) explains why women are constantly excluded from sites of memory and commemoration: “Masculine hegemonies efface women as a category of analysis from the areas of public memory, transforming them into dispossessed and non-historical beings, and failing to acknowledge their active social participation and contribution in the process” (p. 3). In my view, giving a voiceto Palestinian women is vital to understanding the complete narrative of Al-Nakba. Bell hooks (1989) insists that “women have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities and name history” (cited in Kassem, 2011: 10). And so in order to understand the whole experience of Al-Nakba, women should be included because they were part of the shared experience of being displaced and experiencing loss. This presentation will focus on the unofficial memories of 1948 that have been transferred by women to the different generations of their families inside the home in order to understand how Palestinian women political activist were influenced by these experiences, and how their families’ histories of being refugees constructed their political identities. This paper is based on interviews I have conducted with former Palestinian women political prisoners who belong to refugee families, and who have grown up with the memories of their grandmothers or mothers about their hometowns or villages. These stories create anger and a constant feeling of loss. It has been an honor for me to meet with these third or second generationwomen of the West Bank refugee camps in order to understand how Al-Nakba influenced their everyday lives.

**The Composition of Palestinian Refugee Homes**

The Palestinian home is a site of complex interactions between politics, traditions, and social and religious practices. It is the space of memories that are produced by the experience and reproduce by remembering. Palestinian *sumud* (steadfastness), which is a form of nonviolent resistance, can be constructed by keeping the memory of Al-Naba alive, and transferring it to younger generations in order for them to keep the hope of return, and to return to their stolen lands. To remember is a way to confirm the illegality and injustice Palestinian refugees have experienced in 1948 and that they have been dispossessed and displaced from their lands to diaspora, to live in refugee camps that they are living in to this day. Palestinian refugee homes are the space where memories are produced; objects that surround them are a means to remind them of their suffering created by the establishment of Israel, and to encourage them to keep the memory of 1948 as a form of resistance. As Rita Felski (2002) writes, “home often contains many of the objects that have helped to shape a life- history, and the meanings and memories with which these objects are encrypted. Home is, in Mary Douglas’s phrase, a “memory machine”” (p. 25). She continues, “it is furthermore a site in which political subjectivities and social identities are produced and constructed.” Germ (2002) argues that home is not only a physical space, but also serves as an important base for the development and maintenance of identities. The Palestinian home is the first space in which people become political.

In Palestinian refugee camps, the home is notthe only a space of memories of Al-Nakba, but public space is as well.There are many political themes presented on the streets, walls, and in neighbourhood centers that reflect the residents’ hope of going back to their lands. These themes illustrate the meaning of loss, making the refugees feel that this is not a home, but rather it is a temporal space whereidentities are constructed,and where people always feel precarious and prepared to return one day in the future.

There is a constant rhythm in the repetition of habits inside home and in everyday routines of family members. For Palestinians, politics is something they experience in the details and the practices of everyday life: it is in the conversation and social activities, as well as in their encounters with the Israeli occupation on the streets, at checkpoints, and in their own homes and neighbourhoods. The repetitive rituals and routine activities of everyday life are saturated with national themes. Through this routine, Palestinians perform their *sumud* and it becomes the motivation of their everyday life under occupation.

Memories inside homes that have been transmitted by the different generations is the first learning experience of what happen totheir family when they became refugees. Sawsan from Balata refugee camp grew up in a refugee family, so most of her parents’ discussions were about the Palestinian land that had been stolen from them, andher family’s experience of escaping and hiding from the Israeli soldiers, losing her stepmother, who was killed, and losing her brother. This made her understand her identity as a refugee – what it means to be forced to leave her family’s land and then confined in a refugee camp. Sawsan’s example is typical of the participants’ narratives as they talked about how they became politically aware of the Israeli occupation. Even though she was born in the early eighties, she remembers her father stories and those of the rest of her brothers.

Hayam lives in Al-Jalazon refugee camp near Ramallah; this camp was frequently targeted by attacks by the Israeli military, in part because of its location in front of an Israeli settlement. When it comes to any kind of political action or resistance, we find refugee camps are the first place to start the resistance and to be the center of demonstrations. During her childhood, she developed her political identity and awareness, which encouraged her to start thinking of resisting the occupation. Women in refugee camps are very political because of the stories they grow up hearing; stories of the lost land and how they have to fight for the right of return. Hayam remembers how her mother took her to political activities during the First Intifada. She said:

*I learned how to become an activist from my mother. It is not only men in the family who were politically involved. She used to take me with her to all the protests. She never thought about me as a little girl who can’t go. They used to bring buses for us in the refugee camp to take us to Ramallah city. They used to call the residents of our camp in the mosque speaker for protest so everybody would participate.*

Women were part of, and visible within, these collective protests. Their roles in nonviolent and collective activities have often been highlighted in the literature. Palestinian women also play important roles inside the home in the construction of identities. As hooks (1990) reflects: “in our young minds houses belong to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place- the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls” (41). In the Palestinian context, women take the responsibility of raising children, educating them about political conditions, encouraging their involvement in nonviolent activities, and providing them with a space of safety even when their homes are under attack. This education is both a means of confirming their own *sumud*, as well as teaching their children how to activate theirs.

Palestinian homes inside refugee camps are very small, though the families are usually large. Most of them are divided into two rooms, with some sleeping in the living room. The residents of these houses do not enjoy much privacy, but some can be achieved through the division of women and men. Hayam had one sister and five brothers. Her sister had a disability and needed special care. When the room that her brothers slept in was overtakenby the Israeli occupation forces during her brotherimprisonment, the whole family had to squeeze into one room, shattering the little privacy they had. They felt they had become prisoners in their own house. They felt the presence of the Israelis inside their house all the time gave them the sense that they were continually under control. This strategy of closing a room, which has not been documented or discussed in the literature, is a collective punishment for the entire family and it also serves to warn other activists. This enhances them to keep the experience of their family’s displacement all the time, and to feel the continuous threat to experience and to live the displacement again.

Khawla grew up in Al-Dheisha refugee camp near Bethlehem in the West Bank. She lived with a family of 11 persons in a small house. They suffer from poverty and the loss of their land. Khawla’s grandmother told her about the Nakba and the other stories about their village and how they used to own an extensive piece of land and a big house. As a child, Khawla always compared these stories of the past with her life in the refugee camp. She said these conditions did not give people many options: *‘I think this creates a lot of anger inside us, so people direct their anger toward the occupation… some people escape it by using drugs or by becoming criminals, but for us, we directed our anger into becoming part of the resistance movement.*’

The nostalgia that Palestinians have for the stolen land, which they inherit from the older generations, incites anger at their displacement in crowded, poverty–stricken areas. Khawla was very emotional telling me about her village of origin that she had never seen and her grandmother’s stories. She was also very angry about the fact that they lost everything because of the Israeli occupation, becoming refugees in their own land. Her family’s experience, and the frequency with which it was recounted, was the basis for her to construct a strong political subjectivity, instilling an eagerness to join the national struggle. To keep living and resisting the Israeli occupation, remembering the stolen lands, and maintaining the belief that Palestinians will get them back are very important elements of Palestinian *sumud*. In my own experience of working in refugee camps and listening to refugees’ narratives, the people I spoke to kept insisting that to preserve these memories and beliefs is *sumud* and that it also confirms the injustice of the occupation. Palestinian women lost their homes, thus losing the feeling of security and the space of safety and privacy. Kassem (2011) argues that the “Palestinian home has both personal and collective meaning; it is at once a private and public political space; it is a space of safety and danger; a place of life and death” (p. 235). Such contradictions are a fundamental component of Palestinian homes; people feel socially secure inside their homes, yet they simultaneously feel the threat of being attacked and invaded. The regular Israeli invasion and demolition of Palestinian houses makes the fear of loss a constant feature of Palestinian home life, and people live this precarious life waiting for bad things to happen, especially those in refugee camps, or people who have experienced displacement.

**What can anger and loss do?**

Politics surrounds Palestinian women in every aspect of their life experience, so they often become politically involved, directly or indirectly, which contradicts Sawsan’s comment that ‘women don’t care’, when I asked her what women relateabout their political views of 1948. This contradiction was obvious as she discussed her own political commitment, saying: ‘*What do you think? I couldn’t stand doing nothing and watch. I was always trying to help the fighters, giving them shelter, or warn them if the Israeli soldiers were around. You can’t sit and watch.*’ Sawsan’s statement reflects that women are active agents and that the politics, injuries, and loss of the conflict are played out within their homes.

The experiences of loss change a great deal of Palestinian women's lives. This recalls Butler’s discussion of precarious life. She argues:

To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. The disorientation of grief- ‘who have I become?’ or, indeed, ‘what is left of me?’ ‘what is it in the Other that I have lost?’- posits the ‘I’ in the mode of unkowingness. (2006:30)

Experience of loss and displacement creates a precarious life for Palestinian women. These different experiences prompt them to start thinking about reactions to calm their grief, and to become something else other than what they wanted to become.

Khawla belongs to a strict, conservative family that places rigid restrictions on women in order to protect the family reputation, especially as they live in a refugee camp where everybody knows and watches each other. Khawla was aware of all the social surveillance and restrictions, but she insisted to herself that she wanted to be a freedom fighter. She did not understand her desire to fight in gendered terms. As she recounted to me later: ‘*I never thought about myself as a woman or a feminist or about doing something to confirm the importance of women's role. I just wanted to be part of the national movements. I don’t claim I had any feminist awareness*.’ From an early age, Khawla kept searching for ways to become an activist and to take roles in resisting the occupation to get revenge for her reality of living in poverty, and being a refugee, when she could have been living in her city of origin and having land. When she was student in the university, she sought out the political movements and was recruited to become a freedom fighter, which eventually caused her imprisonment in Israeli prisons.

**Prison Can Be aWay of Return**

These women decided to become politically involved as a way to defend their right of return, and also to be part of the resistance movements against the Israeli occupation, which stole their land, as most of them insisted. Amneh Mona was imprisoned for more than 10 years; she was always trying to insist on her right of return.She used to scream at the Israeli jailors: ‘*We are returning to Palestine’*. For her, as many political prisoners, the right of return is one of the most important elements of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Their families’ experiences and their beliefs of the injustice they went through make it obligatory for them to become freedom fighters, as evidenced by theirresponses to my questions regarding the reasons behind their choices.

Palestinian women are placed in *Hasharon* and *Damon* prisons, both of which are located in Israel, outside the 1967 occupied territory. Palestinian women political prisoners have to show their *sumud,* or steadfastness, during this time, especially in front of the occupier. This goes so far as to even to show that they do not care about the condition of the prison. Hana is a Christian refugee from Al-Ramlehwho lived with her family in Ramallah.She said: ‘*I wasn’t upset when I was imprisoned; I know it is insane, but I had returned to my city of origin; I could smell Al-Ramleh from my cell… I was returned even if I was a prisoner*’. This is a strong reflection for Hana as she was excited to be returned to her city of origin, even when she was imprisoned. The image about her city was built through her mother’s and grandmother’s memories and experiences, which was a way for her to live the freedom of being returned to Al-Ramleh, even when she was imprisoned, relying on the imagined smell that her mother described for her.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, Palestinian women refugees live a continuously precarious life feeling the threat of being displaced because of the occupation tactics of invading Palestinian territories. Because of memories transferred by the different generations of Al-Nakba, Palestinians have felt the threat, anger and loss constantly even without having experienced the event itself. Palestinian women keep the memory of the lost land as a form of resistance and steadfastness; for them to remember is to exist.

**References:**

Butler, J. (2006). *Precarious Life*. London: Verso.

Felski, R. (2000). *Doing Time*. New York: New York University Press.

Hammami, R. (2004). ‘Gender, Nakba, and Nation; Palestinian women's Presence and Absence in the Narration of 1848 Memories.’ *Review of Women's Studies- Institute of Women's Studies- Birzeit University*, 2, pp.26-41.

hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning*. Boston: South End Press.

Kassem, F. (2011). *Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gender Memory.* London: Zed Book.