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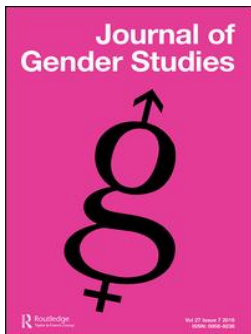
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The misogynist representation of women in Palestinian oral tradition: a socio-political study

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ABSTRACT

This paper, which engages with the critical lines of feminism and socio-linguistics and employs interviews as its central methodology, introduces readers to the ways Palestinian proverbs reinforce a contemporary Palestinian ideology of gender difference based on subjugating women to men's authority. The paper analyses Palestinian proverbs about women alongside contemporary Palestinian practices including: arranged marriage; objectifying women in the marriage market; the silencing of women's voices and honour killing. It is argued here that the Israeli occupation perpetuates the production and consumption of the masculine construction of gender roles as a marker of difference and adherence to familial and national belonging. Feminist views of gender equality espoused by feminist activists, NGO personnel and younger generations are taken to signify immoral symbols of imperial and Western cultures, incompatible with national and religious discourse.

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Gender construction in contemporary Palestine

The impact of feminist activism on political, social and cultural domains has opened up spaces for women in contemporary Western societies to participate in political and social spheres without their moral values being called into question. However, in the Arab world in general, and contemporary Palestine in particular, many women, especially those living in rural areas, are treated as objects, deprived of their voices and choices, and confined in the domestic sphere, so as to conceal their sexualized bodies from the public (masculine) sphere. As Hamamra notes, 'Some Palestinian women are confined to the private spheres of the house, barred from the public domain and discourse to preserve their reputations, which could be tarnished by their movement in public space and by speech to others' (2016, p. 1). The Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs, created in 2003 by women from the United Nations, is a national committee that includes both governmental and non-governmental organisations to combat violence against women by improving the legal policies that discriminate against them. The ministry attributes the violence unleashed against Palestinian women to the interrelated network of traditions, legal systems and the Israeli occupation (2011, pp. 9–12; 19–24). The Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs points out that the severe living conditions Palestinians face under the Israeli occupation propel many families to have their daughters marry young so as to manage their poverty (2011, pp. 11–12, 15).

Palestinian women who violate the virtues of silence, submission, obedience and chastity are subject to the social forces of gossip, scandal and honour killing. These forces are the primary means through which Palestinian society imposes an honour code on women and curtails their

transgression of gender roles. Since Palestinians are confined by systems of honour and reputation, one piece of gossip may legitimise male figures' killing an allegedly transgressive women so as to silence rumour. Honour killing demonstrates men's control over women and the punitive consequences for women's deviation from imposed norms. The Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs argues that violence against Palestinian women 'is a behaviour that expresses a direction of thought and culture based on control' (2011, p. 9). However, while there is gender inequality in Palestinian society, one should be mindful of the diversity among Palestinians living in the West Bank. Palestinian culture is not monolithic; Palestinians are heterogeneous in terms of religion, language, educational attainment and urbanization. Furthermore, gendered discourse vary according to numerous factors, including the identity of the speaker, his or her interlocutor(s), and the social context in which the discourse occurs. Not all Palestinian women are oppressed and silenced. In fact, Palestine has produced remarkable female authors, artists, business and stateswomen. I will, therefore, outline the Palestinian context with reference to critical readings and to my own lived understanding as a Palestinian professor and critic living in a traditional, conservative town. The focus of this article is on the construction of gender roles in the rural areas of the West Bank of Palestine, where sexist proverbs are prevalent, and restrictions placed on women are widespread.

Methodology and data collection

While much research has been carried out in the discipline of oral literature, there is no single study that scrutinizes the image of women in Palestinian proverbs. This study combines a collection of Palestinian proverbs (paremiography) from published collections and fieldwork (interviews) with the study of proverbs (paremiology). The study provides readers opportunity to explore the conventions that govern the lives of women in contemporary Palestine. This article is partially based on a series of open interviews of non-urban Palestinian women and men conducted in Arabic in the West Bank from September 2017 through December 2018. In using the interview as a methodological device, it is worth noting that both the men and women interviewed pride themselves on articulating proverbs, contributing, by doing so, to the social construction and reproduction of patriarchal ideologies. My analysis of Palestinian proverbs, and the interrelation between these proverbs and the Israeli occupation, subverts the gendered status quo and established constructions of gender roles. In fact, in my teaching of language and gender politics in early modern English drama from a Palestinian perspective, many male and female students have been disapproving of my criticism of traditional gender roles. Such students have complained to colleagues that I am immoral instructor. Some of these colleagues also advise me to avoid gender politics and sexuality in my analysis of literary texts. However, students and colleagues, who are eager to change traditional views of gender, have also collected proverbs from their parents and grandparents, newspapers and the internet for this research. In addition to proverbs, examples of ritual practices concerning the objectification of women, enforced marriage and preference for a son over a daughter, are documented based on my lived experience in a rural area in the north of West Bank. Since interviewees have sometimes been critical of Palestinian gender roles, I have preserved their anonymity.

Proverbs and patriarchal structures

This article discusses how proverbs produce and sustain Palestinian patriarchal hegemony. Wolfgang Mieder argues that 'Today it has almost become a cliché to point out that proverbs must be studied in context' (2004, p. 410). I scrutinize proverbs alongside the socio-cultural forces that created them. Moreover, following the feminist assertion that linguistic expressions such as proverbs represent unequal gender relations (Barrett, 2014), the proverbs under discussion are organized according to the 'structures of patriarchy' (Walby, 1990, p. 20). The Palestinian patriarchal structures imparted by the proverbs chosen here are those associated with gender discrimination;

men's control over women's sexuality; arranged marriage; silencing of, and turning a deaf ear to women's voices; confining women to the domestic spheres; male domestic violence against women, and the preference for male children. Since proverbs can be read as cultural signs that shape individual consciousness, the study of women in Palestinian proverbs is complementary to efforts intended to change and dismantle existing gender relations in Palestine.

This article also furthers the analysis of the interaction between Palestinian society and the Israeli occupation, and how this occupation intensifies misogynistic oppression. I follow the feminist criticisms outlined by scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Diane Baxter, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, and NGOs that write specifically about Palestinian culture and gender construction, so as to examine the problematic treatment of the cultural nexus between the Israeli occupation and the use of sexist proverbs. First and foremost, I argue that many Palestinians oppose the feminist ideals of freedom and gender equality, which are associated with Israel. Secondly, the Israeli occupation reinforces Palestinian tribal systems which are resistant to changes to conventional gender roles. Thirdly, I contend that Palestinian men project their powerlessness and shame about the Israeli occupation onto women, playing the role of the Israeli occupation in the familial sphere. Shalhoub-Kevorkian argues that violence against Palestinian women 'is closely linked to this dynamic of continuous oppression and political occupation' (2009, p. 35), adding that '[E]masculated men become additional agents in the process of gender oppression' (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011, p. 31). The occupation, therefore, plays a crucial role in consolidating the conventional gender roles which are imparted through the articulation of sexist proverbs.

A proverb is a concise, rhymed rhetorical utterance that is riddled with meanings and beliefs, orally passing from one generation to another (Schipper, 2003, p. 9). Proverbs are trans-cultural expressions. Milner notes 'the nearly universal distribution' of proverbs throughout cultures, 'almost irrespective of time, place, level of technical and economic development, language or culture' (1969, p. 200). Goddard (2009) points out that 'the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were the golden age for proverbs in England' (p. 112). However, the use and study of proverbs had waned after the eighteenth century, the age of reason (Obelkevich, 1994). Within the context of gender politics, the lack of interest in proverbs in many contemporary Western societies can be linked with the emancipation of women from the masculine ideology of gender difference. However, in traditional Arab contexts, 'proverbs retain not only their currency, but their value as cultural and rhetorical expressions' (Bartlotti, 2000, p. 1) revealing the extent to which people cling to sexist ideas about women. Kanaana, a Palestinian anthropologist and folklorist, notes that the importance of Palestinian proverbs originates from the fact that Palestinian culture is an oral and aural culture that privileges the spoken over the written (2005). Palestinian proverbs are part of the hegemonic discourse. Traditional men use sexist proverbs as rhetorical strategies so as to rationalize their domination over women through emphasising women's weakness, fragility and powerlessness. I contend that some Palestinian women, especially mothers, in addition to their articulation of sexist proverbs, uphold the patriarchal image of women through reinforcing and imposing an oppressive male culture on their daughters and daughters-in-law. In many rural areas in the West Bank, it is evident that speakers of proverbs are regarded as the mouthpiece of wisdom, experience and linguistic competence.

Palestinian proverbs and women's domestic sphere

In broader terms, Palestinian discourse excludes women from the public sphere (perceived to undermine their honour) and confines them to the domestic sphere. Family honour 'is the concept in whose name most of the restrictions upon the Palestinian woman's freedom of movement are imposed' (Ein-Gil & Aryeh, 1984, p. 171). El Saadawi (1980), an Egyptian novelist, points out that women were represented by Arab male figures as 'a menace to man and society, and the only way to avoid the harm she could do was to isolate her in the home, where she could have no contact with either one or the other' (p.136).

One of the most frequently reiterated proverbs about women is that 'A woman is either for the home or for the grave'. Another proverb asserts that 'A woman leaves her house twice: when she gets married and moves to the house of her husband, and when she dies and is carried to her grave'. The duties of women end at the threshold of the door, beyond which the grave is waiting for them. One might hear a Palestinian villager boast that his wife's 'youth was spent in entire seclusion'. To my grandfather, the domestic sphere of the house and his wife, signified his honour and reputation (*Sharaf* and *Ard* in Arabic). My grandmother told me that he used to confine her in the house when he went out, ordering her not to open the door even if his family visited him in his absence. In Palestinian rural areas, doorways and windows are erotically charged sites. Even the appearance of women at windows, blurring the lines between the domestic and public spheres, can be taken to signify sexual immorality. For example, a working woman from a village in Ramallah included in the work of Chaban *et al.* says that when a woman 'is divorced, they [her family] start restricting her freedom, requesting her to stay at home, not even looking out of the window' (2010, p. 37). The appearance of the female at the window, especially in rural areas, may undermine her sexual reputation and cause gossip in the community. Gossip is an influential expression that provokes anxiety among the female members of Palestinian society. Chaban *et al.* (2010) point out: 'Produced by family or community members, rumours and gossip result in internalised self-regulation mechanisms through which women attempt to protect themselves' (p.25). In interviewing Palestinian women who were subject to violence, Chaban *et al.* (2010) cite the words of a housewife from a camp in Ramallah, who asserts that:

If anyone of us goes out of her home too many times during the week, the community starts talking about her; people at our camp do not like to see women outside their homes. Women prefer to stay home and to postpone their work rather than have people talk about them (p.24, original emphasis)

Palestinian women who transgress the borders of the domestic sphere are subject to verbal and physical violence and sometimes, so-called, honour killing. For example, in 2012, Nancy Zaboun, a 27-year-old mother of three children, was slaughtered by her abusive husband in an open-air Bethlehem market 'because she wanted to work for a few days to earn money to buy her son a birthday present' (Marcus, 2012, p. 5). Even in the domestic sphere of the house, many Palestinian women are under male surveillance. In a personal communication, one of my female students asserted that 'my father and brother's threatening eyes control the movement of my body, tracing my movement between the kitchen, the room and the roof, perceiving my body as a threat to their authority' (28 October 2018). I contend that the Israeli occupation of Palestine exacerbates this conventional construction of gender roles in many Palestinian areas and impedes women's freedom.

The Israeli occupation

The validity of Palestinian proverbs is enhanced by the Israeli occupation which impedes women's emancipation from the confines of gender roles. Haj (1992) points out that 'Patriarchal relations in the Palestinian case must be further situated in the context of Israel's colonization policies and their impact on Palestinian national, class, and gender relations' (p.765). The Palestinian nationalist discourse politicizes the chaste female body as the locus of Palestinian survival and purity. This pure body is created through excluding Palestinian women from the public sphere which is seen as detrimental to their sexual reputation. Rubenberg argues that 'during the intifada, parents were very concerned about their daughters' honor being sullied by contact with Israeli soldiers [...]. Many girls feared *iskat* (having one's honor tarnished, especially by an enemy) and preferred to be at home' (2001, p. 124). In the same vein, Baxter (2007) argues that 'Given the Israeli occupation and the dangers, unrest, harassment, and humiliation that stem from it, home has increasingly become a place of refuge, though there, too, the occupation intrudes' (p.763). Chaban *et al.* cite the words of a girl who says that '*I would say that you achieve security when your State is stable and independent. (...) But it is impossible to feel secure when your country is not free*' (2010, p.18, original

emphasis). Thus, the exclusion of women from the public sphere originates from the Palestinians' desire for a pure nation free from Israeli influence. As Seifert argues, sexual violence against Palestinian women 'is likely to destroy a nation's culture' (1996, p. 39). In this sense, Palestinian women face double systems of oppression – Israeli occupation and Palestinian traditions – which reinforce each other's dynamic.

Palestinian Islamists delegitimise feminist discourses, depicting them as alien imports of Western culture and contrary to the nationalist agenda. Golley (2004) points out that 'feminism is an illegal immigrant and an alien import to the Arab world and, as such, is not relevant to the people and their culture' (p.521). In her analysis of the feminist movement shored up during the reign of HAMAS in the Gaza Strip, Jad (2010) notes that the cultural leaders in Hamas 'link [...] women's NGOs to the West, depicting them as a ploy of the West to weaken the nation and betray it by "smothering" Israel's existence in the heart of the *umma*' (par. 39). Many Palestinians' repudiation of the feminist agenda raised by NGOs is based on the view that NGOs focus on a liberal, individualistic notion of rights; one which overlooks the Israeli occupation (Hajjar, 2001). Furthermore, feminism in Palestinian society has been associated with Western women's sexual immorality which undermines the social norms of Palestinian family and society (Glavanis-Grantham, 1996). In many rural areas of the West Bank of Palestine, it is commonplace that women articulate their womanhood in contrast to Western women who are perceived as immoral, and irresponsible mothers. In the village where I live, many women castigate Arab women who forsake traditions and adopt modern, secular, capitalist, Western ideals, values and ways of life. Thus, secular women's struggle for gender equality has been interpreted by Islamists and other traditionalists as a display of 'licentiousness and dissoluteness' and 'disloyalty to Islamic tradition' (Greenberg, 1992, p. 13). The sexualizing of women's struggle is an effort on the part of traditionalists to discredit feminism.

The violence inflicted on Palestinian men by the Israeli occupation contributes to aggression against women. As Peteet says, 'some men who were subjected to beatings and torture return home to inflict violence upon women' (2000, p. 120). Palestinian men project their despair and powerlessness in the face of the Israeli occupation onto women, trying to assert their power in the domestic sphere. Men, whose traditional role is seen as protecting women, turn against them; women are objects that serve lost masculinity which reasserts itself through violence. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian notes, 'emasculated men become additional agents in the process of gender oppression' (2011, p. 31). Domestic violence is to be set against the backdrop of the violence Palestinian male figures are subjected to by the Israeli occupation while Israeli occupation positions feminism as an immoral symbol of Western culture.

In her analysis of honour crimes among Palestinians in Israel, Nahla Abdo points out that the strategy of not interfering in honour killings stems from the Israeli policy of keeping 'Palestinian citizens socially and culturally under the grip of their traditional leadership' (2004, p. 75–76). Abdo notes that Israeli media is obsessed with honour crimes in Palestine, employing this destructive practice to debase Palestinians (2004).

Palestinian proverbs and household business

Palestinian proverbs emphasise the lack of authority that women have aside from their household work. The Palestinian proverb – 'a woman is half-minded' – is often reiterated by men and women to reveal the exclusion of women from decision-making even in their own homes. The proverb – 'Behold! His wife is the master of the house' – articulates the vision of women on top. This proverb is said ironically on occasions where a wife (an incapable person) usurps her husband's authority. This exclusion of women from the exercise of authority is substantiated by proverbs which promote male deafness to the female voice: 'Listen to a woman, but do not act on her opinion'; 'Obeying women leads to regret'; 'You can ask a woman's opinion, but never heed her advice'. These proverbs suggest that women are untrustworthy and that men should keep important matters from them. When a man

listens to a woman, he is ridiculed and blamed for being effeminate: 'He who gives his secret to a woman is a woman, son of a woman' and 'none consults a woman but a woman'. In many rural areas of the West Bank of Palestine, women's speech and decision-making are contrary to the model of feminine behaviour demanded, and at odds with the traditional roles appointed to women as nurturing figures. The association of women with household work – the kitchen in particular – is illustrated in the following proverbs: 'A woman graduates in the kitchen' and 'Even if a woman launches to Mars, she lands in the kitchen'. Palestinian women nurture their families through cooking. Within this context, Zuhur (2003) states that Arab societies cling to 'a patriarchal system in which women's position within and duties toward the family precede their rights as individuals' (p.17).

Palestinian proverbs and the female voice and shame

While Palestinian women's confinement to the domestic sphere and their sexual reputation coexist, a woman's oral and aural openness is taken to signify lasciviousness. Latterly, avenues for public expressions have broadened due to the World Wide Web and in 2011, Aya Baradiya, a 22-year-old woman from Hebron, was murdered by her uncle, who threw her in a well, because she called and received calls from a man. Her uncle thought that her listening and speaking to a man were signs of sexual desire. While Aya Baradiya was mourned as innocent, 'young women were still barred from using the telephone and often from leaving their homes' (Johnson, 2010, p. 108). Some Palestinian proverbs associate women's oral and aural openness with sexual appetite. For example the proverb – 'If a girl smiles and shows you her teeth, befriend her and do not be afraid' – implies that a girl's smile is an expression of sexual desire; the openness of the female mouth is akin to the openness of the genitals. Hamamra points out that 'It is a common folkloric tradition that Palestinians call a vocal woman *mostarajelli* ("mannish woman") or *emzanebri* ("horny woman")' (2016, p. 17). Many Palestinian men and women resort to the proverbial injunction that 'A female voice is a sign of shame' whenever a woman opens up her mouth in the public sphere or speaks in defiance of patriarchal authority. The silencing and demonizing of the female voice is a means for male figures to control women's agency; it is an aspect of men's rhetorical potency that perpetuates patriarchal ideology. This is a common trope and a topical issue in Palestinian feminist discourse.

Many Palestinian proverbs perpetuate the perception of women as evil and sinful: 'The pit of hell consists of women' and 'a woman is inspired by the devil'. In the rural areas of the West Bank, there are men who refer to the female sexual organ as the pit of hell which swallows men's strength. Furthermore, the legacy of Eve who listened to the Serpent, and disobeyed God, contaminates other women, the daughters of Eve, who lead men to destruction due to their devilish plots and deceptive and wanton voices. One proverb says that 'woman's tricks are victorious over the devil's tricks'.

As they are the source of sexual temptation, women are to be controlled. Within the context of domestic violence, women are generally perceived as the conduit for quarrels among men or brothers of the family. As one proverb states, 'The chatter of two girls brings about destruction of two houses'. Women are, therefore, associated with gossip which is a threat to male figures' authority and to homosocial relations.

The construction of women as deceptive and untrustworthy whose voices are signs of lewdness hinders their protests against male violence. Many Palestinian women who are subject to violence are 'pushed to remain silent, in order to preserve the family's honour' (Chaban et al., 2010, p. 35). Women's protestations of innocence fall on deaf male ears since the female voice is traditionally associated with deception and sexual immorality.

Women's voices are further restrained by the patriarchal structure of Palestinian society and its discriminatory legal system. Marcus (2012) points out 'that two women murdered in Bethlehem and Hebron had approached the police, but it did not supply them with protection and did not save their lives' (p.6). Women who suffer from violence at home do not take action because 'the vast majority of

laws within the Palestinian Territories not only discriminate against women, but also tolerate violence against women and girls' (Chaban et al., 2010, p. 51). While Palestinian women might use the feminine expression of tears to convey their grievances, Palestinian men, and even some women, view women's tears to be signs of deception since the proverb states that 'women's tears are the tears of crocodiles'.

Sexists proverbs vs. Qur'anic teachings

The construction of women as untrustworthy, morally inferior and wicked is incompatible with the Qur'an which does not represent Eve as a temptress. According to the Qur'an, Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden was not because she was a seducer, but rather because she was a participant. It was Adam who disobeyed God's word and listened to Satan and Adam's sin led to the downfall of Eve. God says, '[b]ut Satan whispered to Adam, saying, "Adam, shall I show you the tree of immortality and power that never decays?" and they both ate from it [...]. Adam disobeyed his Lord and was led astray' (Ta Ha 20. 120–21, Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. Trans., 2010). Palestinian representations of the female as wicked differ from the representation of the female as an innocent participant in the Qur'an. Such negative representations resonate with the Christian story in Genesis where Eve is a transgressive sinner who listened to the Serpent and persuaded Adam to disobey God and eat from the forbidden fruit. While the subordination of women is an indispensable part of the creation story in Genesis, the Qur'an emancipates women from oppression and the taint of the original sin that affirms Christian patriarchy. The patriarchal ideology embodied in Palestinian proverbs is inconsistent with the teachings of the Qur'an. As one of my female students remarked, 'Islam is not the culprit of gender inequality, but traditions oppress women in the Palestinian society'. She states further that 'unfortunately, many Palestinians fear traditions and those who follow and construct these traditions and not the God of people' (9 December 2018).

Palestinian proverbs and arranged marriage

In rural areas of the West Bank, the code of honour encourages early marriage. As Haj (1992) notes, 'sexual purity and lineage honor are seen as inseparable. One way to ensure lineage honor is early arranged marriage' (p.764). In many Palestinian rural areas, the danger of an unmarried girl resides in her potential to express, and act on her sexual desires outside the sphere of marriage, bringing shame to her family. Arranged, and enforced, marriage is a conspicuous manifestation of patriarchy and a means of controlling women's sexuality. In Palestinian society, men's honour 'is rooted in the sexual behavior of women' (Afsaruddin, 1999, p. 9). The Palestinian proverb – 'A man's honour lies between the legs of his woman' – ostensibly links men's honour to women's sexuality and suggests that 'women have traditionally been the appointed site of familial honour and shame and the representatives of the public face of the society's commitment to its faith' (Afshar, 1994, p. 129). In the words of Abu-Lughod, 'women are reduced to their hymens' (2011, p. 22). A working woman from Hebron asserts that some Palestinian families construct early marriage as a protective device: '*If her father is not able to protect her [his daughter], he marries her off to someone who can protect her. By doing so, he gets rid of a heavy responsibility*' (Chaban et al., 2010, p.36, original emphasis). Many proverbs advise fathers to get their daughters married before their sons: 'Find a man to marry your daughter before you find a wife for your son'. Fathers must have their daughters married to ensure that their sexuality is channelled into the culturally approved practice of marriage. It is common for Palestinians to equate bachelorhood, especially that of women, with shame.

Many Palestinian women are objects of exchange in the marriage market; their choice is taken from them. The Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs states that 'women's role and status in the society has been marginalized as women's power and control to decide of their fate and make their own decisions has been taken away from them' (2011, p. 10). Palestinian women's inability to defy violence evokes feelings of powerlessness. A schoolgirl from Ramallah states: 'I am afraid of being

urged to marry at an early stage of my life or being urged to get married to someone who I do not like' (Chaban et al., 2010, p. 35). Chaban et al. (2010) refer to the words of a university student from a camp in Nablus, saying:

I have another friend who used to be in love with a man and before he could ask for her hand in marriage, her parents forced her to marry another man under the pretence that she was 21 years old and too old to marry (she was like an old maid); they forced her into another marriage. The marriage decision is not in her hands, not like the young men; they choose (p.35, original emphasis).

Non-urban Palestinian women are advised to be silent and obedient in the ritual of marriage. This strengthens male domination over the female body and the control of feminine desire. One of my female students, a mother of three children, said that 'I was forced to get married to my cousin whom I did not love then'. She said that 'in many Palestinian areas, men deprive women of the basic human right to choose for themselves' (2 October 2017). Many Palestinian villagers resort to the proverb that 'silence is a sign of content' and that 'silence is consent'; silence to the question of marriage is a sign of acceptance and adherence to the dictates of male figures' authority. If a girl chooses for herself, then 'she will choose either a drummer or a piper'. Choosing is a masculine practice, while to be chosen is described as a characteristic of femininity.

Many Palestinian women are treated as commodities in the marriage market, being defined chiefly in terms of their bodies. In her study about proverbs in different cultures, Schipper notes that 'Women are mostly associated with beauty, and men with intelligence' (2003, p. 41). Many Palestinian proverbs reveal that women are judged by their appearance rather than their actions; 'The beautiful woman is a half of misery' and 'She says to the Moon go to stand in your place'. These proverbs suggest the patriarchal construction of women as objects of sexual and visual pleasure. The oral construction of the sexually attractive woman as a horse or a pony to be bought and ridden is another illuminating example of the male commodification of the female. The symbolic purchase of a horse is enacted in the cultural rituals surrounding betrothal and marriage in many Palestinian rural areas. The groom's female relatives inspect the bride's hair, mouth and eyes, making the bride a commodity in the marriage market. This scrutiny of the female demonstrates how women are complicit with male figures' aggressive and sexual desires, always configuring masculinity as the superior position vis-à-vis femininity. Another example of the construction of the female as an object of sex, and the complicity of women in promoting male sexual desire, is illuminated in painting the female body with henna. In many rural areas of the West Bank of Palestine, the bride's female relatives and friends decorate her body so as to enhance her sexual desirability to the groom. In doing so, they perpetuate patriarchal conventions that reduce women to sexual objects in the service of men.

Furthermore, it is a common folkloric tradition for Palestinians to equate women with land; both signify man's honour and dignity. Land and women are exchangeable fertile vessels, ploughed by the man who buys and possesses them. Many Palestinian women are also verbally equated with food, satisfying male hunger. For example, the Palestinian proverb – 'He devoured the feast and threw away the bones' – suggests that women are feasts of flesh that males devour, digest and expel. Once a woman loses her physical beauty, she changes from being an object of her husband's sexual desire to being a target for his hostility and possible divorce. As one proverb asserts, 'A woman is easily disposable like shoes'.

Many Palestinian women move from being the property of their fathers to being the property of their husbands who dominate and control their movement and desires. As Baxter (2007) notes, 'males are charged with directing the lives of females (and younger men) while women are expected to serve the interests of the family's males' (p.744). In the rural areas of the West Bank, one might hear a husband refer to his wife as 'my money, my right' (*mali, halali*) because he gets his wife by paying a dowry. This representation of marriage as a proprietary transaction is substantiated by Palestinians' reference to marriage as *amlak*, *imlak*, meaning to possess a purchased commodity, that is, the wife. The Palestinian proverb – 'He who pays his money can

have the Sultan's daughter for his bride' – suggests marriage to be a financial contract. In Palestinian rural areas, the wife is configured as the ornament and crown of her husband. The wife's agency is incorporated into that of her husband who controls her body, movement and speech. This is substantiated by the long-folkloric cliché that women's bodies are gardens and men's heads are gardeners.

Preference of boys over girls

Palestinian discrimination against women is illuminated in the preference for boys over girls when starting a family. The preference for male children who are taken to signify honour and the perception of female children as tokens of burden and shame are common features in Palestinian proverbs: 'Looking after a snake is better than conceiving a girl' and 'The morning of a snake is preferable to the morning of a girl'. A boy, on the other hand, 'even if he plays with his own faeces [an indicator of insanity] affords benefits', because he preserves the name of the family and ensures the lineage (Canaan, 1931, p. 175). For men the purpose of marriage, and building a house is the conception of sons. This view can be substantiated by the fact that the word *ibn* (son) has the same root as *bana* (to build). When a man says 'I want to build a house', he means that he intends to build a family. 'May God make your house prosper' is an expression wishing wealth to a house by adding children. In Palestinian society, it is the norm to identify men and women by placing the prefix Abu or Om with their male child's name. For example, Abu Ahmad or Om Ahmad means father of Ahmad or mother of Ahmad, respectively. Among Palestinians who are mired in the stagnant traditions of gender difference, the title 'Abu al Banaat', meaning father of daughters, is considered an insult to the addressee. As the proverb asserts, 'A girl brings shame to the family'. Some fathers wish the death of their daughters and believe that 'The death of girls is a blessing', or, as another proverb has it, 'Your girl died because of your good character'. It is significant to highlight that this misogyny, as Rubenberg (2001) points out, was 'institutionalized and religiously and philosophically legitimated in Middle Eastern culture long before the advent of Islam' (p. 52). It was the idea of treating daughters as sources of shame that led pagan Arabs, before the advent of Islam, to bury women alive to spare men the shame – a practice that Islam condemns (The Bee 16. 58–59). Abu-Lughod points out that the 'constant association [of honour crimes] with stories and reports from the Middle East and South Asia, or immigrant communities originating in these regions, has given them a special association with Islam' (2011, p. 18), but the practice of honour killing, and the perception of the female as a sign of shame, are deviations from Qur'anic guidance.

The preference for sons is reinforced by the death of males fighting the Israeli occupation and the desire to defend the motherland, Palestine. Within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, women's bodies are considered fertile vessels that conceive sons who are necessary to Palestine's survival. As Silva (2003) notes, 'men are conferred with society's esteem, and the womb is valorised when it produces sons' (p.39). Motherhood, in contemporary Palestine, is a private endeavour with national collective significance, ensuring the continued existence of the nation and preservation of its honour, as well as its physical, cultural and social development. The home is a microcosm of the nation, and the process of homemaking, where the mother instructs her daughters to conform to the feminine virtues of silence, obedience, submission and chastity, and instructs her sons to be powerful and assertive, parallels nation-making. The social value of women lies in their ability to give birth to sons who enable their mothers to gain respect from their husbands and their families-in-law. As the Palestinian proverb asserts, 'By the delivery of Zaid, she became worthy'.

This double standard in Palestinian culture where parents discriminate in favour of their sons is substantiated by the family-in-law's hostile attitude towards the childless woman and to the mother who gives birth to a female child. Since childbearing occupies a central role in the preserving lineage and building Palestine, childless women are subject to verbal and physical violence and to the threat of polygamy. Abdel Jawad (1989) points out that 'A woman derives her prestige and security from her fertility and productivity. A childless woman or one who has only

baby girls, faces the threat of divorce or subordination to another partner' (p.307). A Palestinian proverb suggests that the childless woman should be treated like a fruitless tree 'The tree that does not bear fruit should be cut'. While a Palestinian husband prefers male children so as to ensure male heirs for the family, the wife prefers male children to maintain her married life and avert her husband's, and her family-in-law's hostility.

Palestinians' discrimination against women, and their preference for sons, is further highlighted by the discourse surrounding 'the evil eye' arising from envy. Many Palestinians believe in the power of the evil eye, in that a man or a woman can cause harm and even death to the object of their gazes. Palestinian women, especially those living in rural areas, express extreme worries about the health of their male children; they shield them away from the gaze of the other that may cause their demise. In my village, and the neighbouring areas in the West Bank, some women take steps to protect their male children from the evil eye. One of the most common practices among rural women is the piercing of the ears of the boy and having him wear earrings, so as to deceive the evil eye about the sex of the child. Another method that women resort to, so as to fortify their male progeny, is the reconstruction of the gender of the male boy as a female through the use of female costumes. The child is clothed in female costumes to deceive the evil eye and to protect the male child from harmful eyes. These examples show that girls are inferior to boys since the former does not attract the attention of the evil eye. The articulation of this view by women reveals complicity in their own victimization through their internalization of masculine oppression based on the superiority of the male and the inferiority of the female. Furthermore, while men are responsible for protecting women, it is the female child that is used to protect and save the life of a male child. While parents perceive girls as burdens, they care about the health and wellbeing of their male children, the bearers of family lineage.

Punishing transgressive women

The objectification of women's bodies renders the practice of physical violence (beating), psychological violence (insult) and social violence (divorce and polygamy) acceptable. Palestinian male figures' violence against women is an essential part of their identity construction. Sen (2005) argues that 'codes of honour serve to construct not only what it means to be a woman but also what it means to be a man, and hence are central to social meanings of gender' (p.48). Palestinian men realize their masculinity through verbal and physical violence against women who are alleged to have transgressed the conventions of gender roles. Afshar argues that honour killing (the killing by men of female family members who are believed to transgress the borders of gender roles and 'taint the reputation' of the family) is perceived in many Middle Eastern countries as 'the national duty of men' (1998, p. 173). The Palestinian proverb – 'When a woman's horn grows, it should be broken' – shows that women who transgress Palestinian norms, or challenge authority, are punished and relegated to subordinate roles. Honour killing is one of the mechanisms of social control imposed by Palestinian men on women; it 'is an omnipresent danger that suggests a reclaiming of patriarchal honour through the eradication of a rebellious woman' (Hamamra, 2016, p. 1). Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2002) states that 234 Palestinian women were killed due to honour violations between 1996 and 1998. Punishing the allegedly transgressive women in many areas of Palestine 'demonstrates', as Baxter (2007) points out, 'male control over female family members [...]; it serves as a stern warning to other females; reasserts cultural values; reduces [...] familial shame; and it limits the decline in the family's reputation' (p.753). Palestinians glorify both honour killing and killers who are perceived as protectors of honour. An op-ed in the official Palestinian authority asserted that "'There are some who even praise and glorify this [honour killings] as manly, heroic act, turning it into an aspect of [our] culture that molds the characters of Arab and Islamic societies' (Quoted in Marcus, 2012, p. 2).

Women's complicity with patriarchal construction of gender roles

Some sexist proverbs are reiterated by women as a way to dominate and discipline other women. In other words, some Palestinian women are complicit with male figures' violence against women. Women interviewed in my village, and in other rural areas, assert that proverbs are full of didactic lessons, bemoaning younger generations who are oblivious to their culture and to the morality embodied in proverbs. Indeed, many women are the mouthpiece of conventional gender roles; they play the role of the victimizer through reinforcing and imposing an oppressive male culture. Arfaoui and Moghada point out that 'Surveys conducted in some countries find that even women have internalized the idea that domestic violence must be their own fault, and that men are entitled to "correct" their wives' (2016, p. 640). Palestinian women coerce each other into following a patriarchal agenda. A schoolgirl from Ramallah justifies verbal and physical violence against women, saying that *'May be it is your fault if your father is maltreating you or humiliating you. It could be your fault and not always his. May be he is only trying to educate you'* (Chaban et al., 2010, p.32, original emphasis). Roald (2013) observes that 'women often condemn other women's "bad behavior" or "indecent clothing" in front of their husbands' (p.341). Umm Khalid, a woman from the West Bank, 'taught her daughters to keep their voices low in public, and nagged them about proper clothing' (Roald, 2013, p. 343). Chaban et al. (2010) note that some women 'indicated that women's obligation to maintain a modest appearance extends to the inside of their homes, sometimes implying that women are responsible for "provoking" men's abusive behaviour' (p.35). Within the context of enforced marriage, many mothers act as patriarchal agents, persuading their daughters to get married, for, as one of my female students says, 'in Palestinian society, marriage is the ultimate goal of any woman's life' (3 August 2017). These examples reveal that some Palestinian women internalise the masculine constructions of gender difference predicated on male supremacy and female subordination.

Conclusion

This article shows that Palestinian proverbs have the power to produce and sustain the patriarchal ideology which is based on excluding women from the social and political spheres of decision-making; confining women to the domestic sphere; silencing and demonizing their voices; endorsing violence against women, and conveying a positive image of sons over daughters. The sexist proverbs discussed in this paper are widely reiterated by rural residents who are governed by traditional and tribal systems, which resist changes to gender roles. A conscious effort on the part of women to diminish the social, political, and economic discrimination that has been perpetuated by the language of sexism is an important step towards eradicating man's inhumanity to women. I have argued that the currency of Palestinian proverbs is consolidated by the Israeli occupation which hinders the emancipation of women from the confines/coffins of gender roles. The liberation of Palestine and the emancipation of women from the confines of traditions are, therefore, linked. While Islamic fundamentalists claim that feminist views are immoral symbols of Western culture, the incompatibility of gender roles imparted by sexist proverbs with the teachings of the Qur'an stimulates intense motivations for change and a rethinking of sexist Palestinian proverbs. The dialectic and interrelated relationship between Israeli occupation and the construction of gender difference begs a more intricate elaboration in future feminist research.

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