

Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation:

Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation

Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin (eds.)
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Writing by feminists seeking to understand and analyse women's experiences of conflict and the terrible suffering which accompanies it has become relatively common over the last ten or twenty years. They represent an important and increasingly valuable thread in the study of ethnic violence by forcing activists, policymakers and academics to take account of its gendered components. This collection, whilst clearly in this tradition, is unusual and, for a number of reasons, disturbing.

The underlying idea, to examine the many forms of loss, suffering and 'dislocation' experienced by women from Palestinian and Israeli backgrounds through a series of personal narratives, is clearly set out in the introduction provided by the two editors. But the complex layers and sub-texts of this seemingly simple undertaking surface at once in these first pages. The two editors represent the two traditions and their joint introduction is in the form of a dialogue conducted between December 1999 and May 2001. Inevitably, this struggles not only with the process of structuring and collating a book which draws on the common threads in the experiences of women from two traditions which frequently find dialogue almost impossible but also with the impact of the spiralling violence of the second, al-Aqsa, Intifada.

In a sense this dialogue lays all the problems bare and the

life stories themselves serve to elaborate and personalise the key issues. However, this is not to minimise their impact since it is hard to read the whole set of narratives without experiencing a deep sense of despair. Many of stories are harrowing and the relentless catalogue of suffering in narrative after narrative is likely to leave the reader drained. Maybe this is one of the effects the writers were seeking to produce, perhaps we do need to be forcibly and repeatedly reminded just how awful some of the effects of conflict are for individuals, families and communities.

To pick out individual contributions seems almost inappropriate, as though it implied a hierarchy of suffering. At the same time there are clear and fascinating generational differences in the narratives. The accounts provided by the older Palestinian women in particular stand out with their spare, gaunt presentation. The recollection of horrific events in plain, almost detached and seemingly unemotional, style is deeply moving. Many of the

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younger women provide valuable details of context and explain the wider background against which individual events occurred but their accounts do not always have the force of those narrated by their mothers and grandmothers. Since many of these younger contributors are writers and academics, it is not surprising that their political beliefs and theoretical understandings are interwoven with their personal accounts. This helps the reader to understand 'where the author is coming from', but just occasionally it also leaves a slight sense of the ideology dictating and shaping the story.

The most thought provoking aspect of the book, however, is linked to its basic structure. Although the editors go to considerable trouble to highlight the complexity of the relationship between the sufferings that women from Arab/Palestinian backgrounds have experienced since the establishment of the state of Israel and the suffering of those women from Jewish/Israeli communities during and since the Holocaust, the structure inevitably invites comparison. But the reality of what has happened in Israel and the Occupied Territories since 1947-8, and what is happening now, makes this almost impossible. The current imbalance of power between the two communities and the fact that one group has physically displaced the other, in many of the places they write about, colours the whole narrative. On the one hand, it makes it extremely difficult for the Arab/Palestinian women to empathise with Israeli concerns. On the other, the Jewish/Israeli women in spite of the fact that they hold liberal positions and express general distaste for aspects of current Israeli

government policies, find it extremely disturbing to acknowledge the full force of what actually happened to many Palestinian communities.

Perhaps one of the most telling accounts is Nira Yuval-Davis's painful recollection of the impact of discovering that the Palestinian she meets in London and begins a relationship with had - as a small child - been forced out of the fishing village which later became the idyllic location for her childhood family holidays. The problems which this imbalance creates could be cited as a weakness of the book but perhaps they are also part of a subtle sub-text through which the editors and authors invite us to look again at a seemingly intractable problem and consider what compromises and accommodations would have to be made to achieve any sort of stable future.

This is not an 'easy read' at any level but it is a book which should not be pigeonholed and perhaps ignored by many academics and policy makers with the argument that it is for women, feminists and liberals. It could be put on the required reading list for politicians and community leaders in divided societies everywhere. If they could really read with some semblance of an open mind it would not make their task simpler but it just might make a difference.

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