

The Association between Individuality and National-Political Issues in the Literary Works of Contemporary Palestinian Female Writers

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the connection between female individuality and national-political issues in contemporary Palestinian women's writing. By analyzing a representative set of works written since 1987 by selected popular Palestinian female writers in Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, and the United States, this study seeks to discern the various thematic through which the writers connect women's personal (including women's private experiences and patriarchal social relationships), and national-political issues (including those that relate to home and exile, nation and nationality, and collective identity). This study investigates how Palestinian female writers in different geographic and cultural locations connect female individuality with nationality not to establish the national Palestinian identity; rather, they combine the two to establish their female identity.

Keywords: Female Individuality, National Identity, Palestinian Women Writers

I. Introduction

Palestinian women's literature, which has become a topic of inquiry in recent decades, has undergone several thematic and poetic changes since 1987 (Gottesfeld, 2013;Taha 2002). It is still in its early stages that the character of Palestinian women's writing is insufficiently explored. Most references to this writing deal with its thematic and stylistic characteristics from a general feminist perspective, but many of the themes—most especially female individual and national identities - have not yet been adequately examined.

The aim of this study is to examine the connection between female individuality, and national-political issues in contemporary Palestinian women's writing. To my knowledge, no monographic comprehensive research has been conducted that addresses the literary works of Palestinian women writers living in the diaspora (the Western world and the Arab world) and the literary works of Palestinian women writers living in Inside Palestine ¹, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Nor have there been studies that relate to the works of Palestinian women writers who write in Arabic alongside the works of those who write in English. Furthermore, there has been no research, to my knowledge that relates to different geographic and cultural locations or to different genres of writing. In addition, no research has been conducted on the connection between nationality and female individuality as major concerns of contemporary Palestinian women's writing, though these areas have been among the most notable thematic characteristics of contemporary Palestinian women's literature.

Mahmood Ghanayim has written about Palestinian literature in Inside Palestine(Ghanayim 1995; 2008; 2015), but did not address the writing of Palestinian women writers in the Western world nor in the West Bank or the Arab World. Dorit Gottesfeld has analyzed the development of Palestinian women's literature in Inside Palestine , the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip (Gottesfeld, 2013; 2014) but did not address the writers who write in English. Ibrahim Taha has discussed Palestinian novels written in Israel but did not analyze Palestinian poetry or the Palestinian writers in diaspora (Taha 1990; 2002). Jozeph Zeidan has described the development of Arab women's literature, with some brief references to Palestinian women writers who wrote in Arabic only (Zeidan, 2013; see bibliography).

¹ Israel

Waleed Abu Bakir has investigated individuality in Palestinian works but did not cover the works of Palestinian women writers living in the diaspora or those who not writing in Arabic (Abu Bakir,2014). Jameel Kittani addressed women writers in Inside Palestine but did not address writers in the diaspora (Kittani, 2012). Muhammad Safori has addressed Arab women writers in general, with some references to Palestinian women writers. Nabih al-Qasim has also addressed the works of Palestinian writers, including female writers, but only in Inside Palestine and the West Bank (al-Qasim, 2008; see bibliography). Neither of these scholars has investigated writers not writing in Arabic.

Miriam Cooke focused on the development of modern Arabic literature and women's literature in general, not just that of Palestinians (Cooke, 2001; Cook and Margot, 1999; see bibliography). Juliane Hammer investigated Palestinian writers but only in the diaspora (Hammer, 2005). Ami Elad discussed the Palestinian literature precisely in Inside Palestine (Bouskila, 2013).

Lisa Suhair Maja, Paula W. Sunderman, Therese Saliba, Amal Amirah, and Evelyn Shakir have only addressed Western Arab women writers, with some references to Palestinian women writers in the diaspora but not Palestinian women writers in Inside Palestine or the West bank and Gaza Strip (see bibliography). None of the aforementioned critics have focused particularly on Palestinian women writers from different geographic areas and writing in different languages or different genres. And none of them have referred to the connection of individuality with national religious issues specifically in Palestinian women writing.

This research thus focuses on the connection between female individuality and political issues by analyzing a representative set of works written since 1987 by selected popular Palestinian female writers in Inside Palestine, the West Bank, Jordan, and the United States. It seeks to discern the various themes through which the writers connect female individuality and national-political issues.

The research assumption is that in order to examine the connection among female individuality, and political issues, it is necessary to examine the literary works written by women writers from a variety of geographical locations in order to achieve a more coherent, reliable, and valid study that relates to and represents the range and variety of Palestinian women writers as much as possible. Therefore, from the Inside Palestine and the West Bank, I have chosen Rajaa Bakriya (b. 1973), a novelist; and Sahar Khalifa (b. 1941), a novelist from the West Bank. To represent the Arab world, I have chosen Laila al Atrash (b. 1966) from Jordan. All of these writers write in Arabic. From the United States, I have chosen novelists Laila Halaby (b. 1966), and the poet, Naomi Shihab Nye (b.1952). These last writers write in English.

II. Theoretical Background:

Palestinian women's literature

II.1 Palestinian women's literature from 1948-1967

Until 1967, Palestinian women's literature was distinguished by what Elaine Showalter called "feminine writing" (Gottesfeld , 2013), in which Palestinian women writers followed the canonic male style of writing (Cooke, 1996). The year 1948 was a critical year in which Palestinian women's writers started to establish and formulate their literary works, particularly in romantic short stories, the typical topic of women's writing of that specific period. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, their writing became much more realistic (Gottesfeld, 2013).

Living in Israel were separated from other Palestinian women writers, who live either in the West Bank or in the Diaspora, and living in different geographical locations and sociopolitical circumstances, Palestinian women writers were limited in their writing due to the political circumstances at that time. Living under the Israeli military authority, the Palestinian writers were censored, especially their literary writing that related to Palestinian nationality. Therefore, Palestinian women writers, such as Najwa Farah, one of the most popular writers in that time, tended to write about social issues and romance in a simple realistic poetic style (Gottesfeld, 2013), not to change the current situation but rather to reflect the Palestinian situation and express solidarity with the Palestinians. They expressed the values of tolerance and patience (Gottesfeld, 2013). At that time, Palestinian women writers in the diaspora also wrote romantic realistic stories which reflected the Palestinian refugees' suffering and hard lives, such as Sameera Azam, who is considered to be one of the most successful Palestinian writers in diaspora (Hammer, 2005).

II.2. Palestinian women's literature from 1967 to 1987

The 1967 war between the Arab countries and Israel led to long run changes in all the Palestinian community segments, including its culture. The aftermath war has strengthened the bonds among the three branches of the Palestinian people, that is, Palestinians living inside the Israeli borders, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and in the Diaspora (Bouskila, 2013).

Israeli's lifting of the military regime over Israeli Arabs in late 1967 and the war of 1987 brought enormous changes to Arab society in Israel. These changes were reflected in the work of the local Arab writers. This marked the opening up of the greater Arab world to the local Palestinian Arab community. It was the beginning of the process of the legitimizing not just of the Arabs who lived in Israel and were marginal to the Arab states and to the Palestinians, who gained stature after 1967 and especially in the year 1969 (Bouskila, 2013), but also of their creative efforts (ibid, 11). After 1967, Palestinian literature was accorded the title, "literature of resistance" (Adab Al Muqawami), as first used by the Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani (Bouskila, 2013).

The 1967 war brought Palestinians living in Inside Palestine into much contact with other Arabs including Palestinians in Arab countries. The Palestinian writers, including women writers living inside the Israeli borders, started to write for both the Arabs and the Palestinians living in the Arab world (Bouskila, 2013). This change in the target audience, however, affected the themes they wrote about (ibid), which were mostly about homeland and national resistance (ibid; Taha, 2002).

This period can be called the "feminist phase" (Showalter, 1985; see bibliography), in which the Palestinian women writers protested against the standards and the values of the patriarchal discourse. Their writing was more realistic and ideological. It focused on daily problems women face and female individuality through connecting these to Palestinian nationality. Apart from the Palestinian women living in Israel who wrote about social issues due to the political circumstances in which they lived, the Palestinian women writers mainly connected their problems with national issues (Gottesfeld, 2013; Joseph, 1995).

The women writers from the West Bank and Gaza Strip had an advantage in that they witnessed events first-hand and described what they themselves observed and experienced (Cooke, 1967).

The first Intifada (1987) lent another dimension to the unique situation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in that it led to the creation of literature of a particular nature that focused on the events of the Intifada, playing on the emotions and replete with-slogans and stereotypes. This literature was written in prison and detention centers and its central axis was that of nationalism (Bouskila, 2013).

However, feelings of frustration and despair as a result of the social, economic and political decline after the first intifada , which coincided with the advent of literary modernism and post modernism, led to changes in the new generation of Palestinian women writers (new generation means those writers who began to publish their works after the first Intifada). These writers made the shift from realistic, ideological writing to modernist and postmodernist writing, and from the feminist phase of writing to a female one (Showalter, 1985). They focused on the female experience and on the spirit, and their narrative discourse was concerned with granting the voiceless female a mature narrative voice that was truly her own (Safari, 2011)

II.3. Palestinian women's literature from 1987 to present

This stage of literature, characterized by frustration and depression, started after the first Intifada erupted in 1987. It indicates a new phase of Palestinian women's writing in which a new writing style emerged (Gottesberg, 2013), characterized by "I" identity, that is, female individuality (Bin-Masod, 1994). It free itself from the current acceptable literature canon in the writing to form a legitimate acceptable female discourse to undermine and question the present patriarchal society (ibid). The Intifada, however, was the third watershed moment in Palestinian society which accelerated the progress and changes that had existed under the surface in the three branches (Inside Palestine, West Bank and Gaza Strip, Diaspora) of the Palestinian community (Bouskila, 2013). Though the Intifada was launched in the West Bank and Gaza, it also affected the Palestinians living in the Inside Palestine and their ties with the other branches of the Palestinian people (ibid). The impact of the Intifada on Palestinians in the Diaspora was manifested on the level of the personal and collective Palestinian identity as well as the concrete assistance, mainly economic, to those participating in it. The boundaries emerging among the three parts of the Palestinian nation could be clearly felt among the member writers (ibid).

Since then, Intifada writing has encompassed writers from all three branches, that is, Palestinians living in Israel, in the West Bank and Gaza, and in the Diaspora, without any virtual distinctions among the writings or even noting or emphasizing to which branch the writer belonged.

In short, the contrasts and links among the Palestinian branches of people have consolidated, and this was reflected in their literature during the Intifada period (ibid).

III. Methodology

By analyzing a representative set of works written since 1987 by selected popular Palestinian female writers in Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, and the United States, this study seeks to discern the various thematic through which the writers connect women's personal (including women's private experiences and patriarchal social relationships), and national-political issues (including those that relate to home and exile, nation and nationality, and collective identity). This study investigates how Palestinian female writers in different geographic and cultural locations connect female individuality with nationality not to establish the national Palestinian identity; rather, they combine the two to establish their female identity.

The method of this dissertation is mainly textual and critical analysis. All the writers whom I have treated through are popular authors of high academic and popular standing, with a significant international readership. My main focus is on seven literary works by contemporary Palestinian women writers, two written in English (by American writers- Laila Halabi and Naomi Shihab) and five written in Arabic [by writers from the West Bank (Sahar Khalifa), Jordan (Laila al Atrash), and Inside Palestine (Laila Halabi)] who have, since 1987, connect their female individuality, religious and political issues in order to maintain and establish their female identity.

In this research, I have used the cultural approach for it is a field that shares " the belief that individual human subjectivity (selfhood) develops in a give-and-take relationship with its cultural milieu, while we are constrained within the limits set for us by our culture, we may struggle against those limits or transform them" (Tyson ,295). To conduct this synchronic (for I'm not searching the historical development of the Palestinian women literature) study, I elaborated and documented the emergence and development of a particular strain of modern contemporary Palestinian women's literature.

III.1 Finding

In this study I found that:

- 1) The difficult new social and political circumstances of Palestinian people after the 1948 was the main theme of Palestinian women's writing rather than the female individuality
- 2) Palestinian women's writing after 1948 was not totally feminine, but undermined indications of feminist writing in some case.
- 3) Palestinian women's literature before 1987 was not only literature of national resistance, but also literature of social injustice resistance, viewing female individuality and nationality in the light of national identity rather than individual identity.
- 5) Palestinian women writers from 1987 to the present is distinct thematically and stylistically from the previous, characterized by self-discovery, feeling of despair and frustration , strong stress on women's experience and female individuality, social political and patriarchal obsessions and women organization and alienation, and the inner conflict as a result of generation gap and modernity conflict in Palestinian culture

IV. Discussion

In this article, I explored the connection between the female individuality and national political issues in the contemporary Palestinian women's writing. I examined the themes the selected investigated Palestinian women writers use to establish their female voice and individuality. Identity usually describes and defines the individual's sense of self, group affiliation structural position, and ascribed the achieved status. It's linked to a larger social structure within which the individual thinks and acts. It's a kind of interaction between the individual and the social structure through which the ideas are constructed (Hooks, 2000; Collins, 1998). Palestinian identities have developed differently in different host countries. Its formation is influenced by the existence of the Palestinian community in the host country, the initial circumstances for leaving Palestinian community, and involvement in Palestinian politics (Hammer, 2005; Gohar, 2011). Individuality can shift over time, due to personal experiences and larger social changes (Ruiz, 2012). In this sense, on the bases of my selected literary analysis, the contemporary Palestinian women writers connect their national identity to their female identity in order to establish their female voice and individuality.

In the Palestinian patriarchal society, women have played an important role in improving their society and maintaining its continuity (Gohar, 2011). Apart from their fundamental social, economic and educational role they play, their role in the national resistance from 1948 is clearly seen in different fields and ways. The question of either the national goals proceed the feminist goals or the feminist goals proceed the national goals is addressed in different ways in Palestinian women writings; they either considered their feminist goals as their priority "in order to strive for a simultaneous liberation of women and nation" (Badran, 1988), or their national goals as their priorities, believing that nationalism is more important than their female individuality and gender equality (ibid); or they associate female individuality and nationalism in favour of nationality (ibid); or finally connect nationalism and female individuality as a construct of nationalism and female individuality in which women's liberation was embedded and fought concurrently as feminist and nationalist (Badran, 1988).

Examining the Palestinian women writers living in Inside Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip and diaspora, we see that Palestinian women's literary works address different themes, depending on the time of writing. In this study, I've found that Palestinian women writing from 1987 to present is thematically characterized by self-discovery, feeling of despair and frustration. Unlike their writing 1984-1987 in which Palestinian writers view female individuality and nationality in the light of national identity, Palestinian contemporary writers view female individuality and nationality in the light of individual identity rather than national identity

Based on this study findings, we can relate to the period 1987 to present, as the female phase (Showalter 1985), which is characterized by self-discovery and female voice establishment. I have found that though the investigated writers Rajaa Bakriya, Sahar Khalifa, and Laila al Atrash (writers write in Arabic) and the Palestinian American writers Laila Halaby and Naomi Shihab Nye (write in English), live in different geographic places and write in different languages, address similar themes that discuss the difficulties and challenges that emerge as a result of living in multicultural society, such as gender, political social and religious complexities. Living in different geographical areas and writing different genres in different languages, these writers redefine their female individual identity in their community, they seek recast national narratives and redefine boundaries of identity and community, explore the possibilities of representations as a site of female resistance and female voice establishing even when they address social and political injustice (Majaj, Sunderman, and Saliba, 2002). They manifested the social, political, and patriarchal obsession in several themes including the social structure in which women are still culturally, socially, and literarily defined as and stressed "Other". They are socially marginalized and psychologically feel alienated and stressed along with having women's feelings, thoughts, and individual life.

After the first Intifada (1987), being politically and socially frustrated, the Palestinian contemporary women writers focus more on the female experience and feminine self, rather writing about political issues and women social reality. Throughout their writing, they raise their protest against Palestinian patriarchal society and its cultural and traditional attitude towards them. They relate to Palestinian women's suffering and being marginalized and oppressed by the social norms. By freeing themselves from the existing literary norms and adopting their own ways of writings (Dorit, 2013), they emphasize their inner feelings and pen their individual daily experience and challenges, moving away from national discourse of resistance literature (ibid), highlighting the female presence of the feminine protagonists, the presence of the female narrator, the presence of the feminine characters, and writing from the female perspectives (ibid). It is important to stress that the selected authors address the protagonists' suffering as a part of their societal suffering in general, the harsh reality of societal differences and the loss of the moral standards. They stress strongly women's deep suffer in correlation with their society, stressing women's concerns as well as the Palestinian general social issue. By their protagonists, they create and present a female figure who breaks away from conventions and exploit the social taboos (ibid).

After 1984 Israeli Arab war many Palestinians left their homeland and fled to the neighboring Arab countries namely Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, leaving their homes and properties, and sometimes parts of their extended family (Hammer, 2005). At present, Palestinians live either in Inside Palestine, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or in Palestinians living in Diaspora – Arab countries and the Western countries.

Being either refugees or immigrants in different geographical locations throughout the world, having no connection with each other reduced their shared daily experience in their new cultures and societies, and created new particular lifestyles, values systems and beliefs and political affiliation. Yet, Palestinians in diaspora do have a sense of a shared national identity, their own self perceptions, which pictures Palestine as one unified country with a language and cultural values (Salaita, 2011). They still try to keep a strong attachment to Palestine especially in its symbolic terms.

This sense of duality, torn between their ancestral cultures and tradition (both in homeland and diaspora), on one hand, and not feeling at home anywhere (Hammer 2005), being neither completely Palestinians, Americans, Israeli nor Jordanians, is embodied in their works especially those written by Palestinian writers living in the Inside Palestine and in America.

The historical national stories Palestinian women write as well as the images (figs, olive, and Jerusalem, for instance play an important role in their striving for their nationality as well as their female individuality (ibid).The investigated writers keen to mention historical stories and memories of the Palestinian identity. They tell historical national stories in which women characters (mainly young girls) are the main characters in order to stress Palestinian women's role in striving both natural and international recognition; to redefine and establish the female individuality in their patriarchal society.

Palestine and self-quest are the main topics in Palestinian women's writing. They give voice of Palestinian culture and tradition which at the same time make room for change (Majaj 2001). That is, they don't only affirm and explore the Palestinian culture (as an important component), but also engage in strong self-criticism, which is one of the important elements in some of the women's writing in order to maintain their female voice and individuality. They celebrate their national identity through their celebration to their culture and historical stories and memories, along with their critique of oppressive patriarchal Palestine culture and western prejudices . Culture and tradition is a proof that community preserves its cultural identity. Preserving of the Palestinian heritage is an important part of preserving national and cultural identity. Ethnic food can tell something about one's cultural identity. It can be interested as a symbolic extension of feeding from the mother Palestine. It relates to feelings of home, as it reminded the young adults of their family. The mother cooked traditional food, the celebration and family gathering provided a sense of community and separated home from the outside world, preparing Palestinian dishes was considered part of preserving their cultural identity. Making the home of a place of remembrance, a museum of individual and family fate. These memories define Palestinian identity as the remind the survivors of the loss and pain they have experienced and the hostility of the outside world.

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