

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian. *Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East: A Palestinian Case-Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xiv + 231 pp. \$108.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88222-4; \$39.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-70879-1.

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## Lending Voice to Palestinian Women's Power and Agency

The history of Palestinian women's agency and activism is long and not simply a byproduct of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.[1] However, such activism has grown and matured out of recent adversity and struggle.[2] The creation of the State of Israel in 1948, its annexation of East Jerusalem and occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, in addition to the subsequent Palestinian struggles of the first (1987–1993) and second (2000–present) Intifadas, politicized many Palestinian women from all walks of life, from the elite to the middle class to the peasant. While the focus was primarily national liberation, in recent decades social issues have been on the agenda as well. As is often the case, conflict manages to expose the many facets of violence women face as they lead their daily lives. In recent decades, awareness has been raised over the intersection of violence against Palestinian women perpetrated by the Palestinian community and its patriarchal social attitudes, and the violence perpetrated by the mechanisms of the Israeli occupation.[3]

In her newest publication, *Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East: A Palestinian Case Study*, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian provides firsthand analysis of violence against Palestinian women within the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), primarily in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.[4] As in many of her other publications, this text provides a platform for Palestinian women's voices to travel beyond the immediate conflict zone and avoid

the unfortunate label of victim. Additionally, the text sets out to reveal the ways in which conflict-affected women take on the job of "frontliners," illustrating how Palestinian women have been isolated, ignored, or "otherized" by the international community, and presents the ways in which "the issue of women's 'modernization,' liberty, and 'rights' can be discussed when the politics of women's resistance in a conflict zone is deeply affected by the global economy of fear" (p. 3). Shalhoub-Kevorkian draws upon data primarily from her own clinical research and personal family narratives, as well as from other Palestinian women's rights researchers and historians.

The career of Shalhoub-Kevorkian has involved painstaking research and documentation of abuses perpetrated by the international community, the Israeli Occupation, and Palestinian society against Palestinian women and girls. This research and documentation has provided the foundation for her gender-based advocacy and activism. She was one of the first Palestinian academics to write about domestic violence in the OPT for an international audience and is the founder of the first domestic violence hotline.[5] Her research and activism on violence against Palestinian women has positioned her as an expert on the subject matter, especially on so-called honor killings that have led her to coin the term "femicide." [6] Having recently been awarded the 2008 Gruber Women's Rights Prize for her work to combat violence against women in the OPT, it comes as no surprise then

that Shalhoub-Kevorkian would continue to write on a subject to which she has dedicated her life.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian begins with the assertion that the situation of Palestinian women is often portrayed as one of victimization and oppression or of terroristic vengeance. Not surprisingly, much of this is conveyed through Western media as a way to turn women into gendered symbols and boundary markers. Such portrayal strips historical context from Palestinian women's activism and resistance. All too often, Palestinian women are portrayed as faceless, voiceless, and lacking in any agency, which is what this text seeks to contravene by demonstrating the fluidity of power, victimization, and agency that conflict-affected women experience in their daily lives. The core identity for Palestinian women Shalhoub-Kevorkian seeks to reveal is that of a "frontliner," "for they always incur the first wave of violence as well as the final one" (p. 4)—the violence of their communities, of the opposition forces, of the international community. The voices of these frontliners feature prominently in the text and provide evidence of women's resistance and agency in the face of contravening narratives. The text is also keen to remind the reader that the situation of all conflict-affected women, especially when discussing violence against women, "is closely linked to this dynamic of continuous oppression and political occupation" (p. 35). Shalhoub-Kevorkian's previous research relies heavily upon the use of women's voices not only to accentuate and validate her arguments, but also to provide a platform for those who are routinely silenced. This use of women's voices is deeply embedded in her definition and practice of knowledge production: "the feminist knowledge production of which I speak refers not just to women researchers like me, but more importantly to the women whose voices and narratives I have brought forth in this study" (p. 39).

Shalhoub-Kevorkian then follows with an examination of violence against women in the OPT while also considering the context in which such violence occurs. In doing so, she historicizes violence against Palestinian women thus revealing dynamics and hierarchies of power. Shalhoub-Kevorkian also illustrates how, in discussing and documenting violence against women and in particular Palestinian women, researchers walk a fine line in sensationalizing and Orientalizing women,[7] creating a backlash whereby the women themselves are afraid of discussing/confronting violence for fear of perpetuating cultural stereotypes. From her own experience, Western feminism and feminists have the unfortunate habit of "otherizing" Palestinian women, casting

them as victims of local patriarchy rather than looking at, "the interrelatedness of victimization and agency within the context of Empire" (p. 53). In other words, Palestinian women are routinely silenced and their unique form of agency ignored by the outside world. Viewed through the lens of Western hegemonic practices, Palestinian women are considered as lacking all agency. However, it is the West's image of these women that is most responsible for the silencing and victimization of Palestinian women. In a similar manner, violence against women in the Palestinian context is often conflated with culture rather than with isolated incidents or with an examination of the mechanisms of the occupation.

In an examination of the rhetoric of nation, the reader is introduced to 14-year-old Tamam, a young schoolgirl who claims to be carrying the burdens of the Palestinian people in her school rucksack. Tamam provides an entry point into a chapter focused on what is referred to as a state of "betweenness" by Shalhoub-Kevorkian. Betweenness comes to symbolize the conflicting loyalties Palestinian women must negotiate on a daily basis: from the schizophrenic tangle of loyalties to the nation, to their menfolk, and to themselves, to fighting local patriarchy versus fighting the occupation, to speaking out against gendered violence in the community or choosing to hold back so as to not alienate oneself from family and community. In the state of betweenness, the female body becomes a site of contestation: "Violations of women's bodies become the violation of the very nation of Palestine itself" (p. 88) and violence such as rape is treated as a national security concern. Acts such as going to school and wearing the *hijab* (veil) become acts of resistance for women. In fact, wearing the hijab becomes a way of not just declaring an opposition to the occupation, but also clearly defining one's presence within a militarized and masculinized space. Women's bodies are, thus, true battlegrounds and sites of resistance as women employ not only the hijab, but also traditional embroidery on clothing and the practice of religion as forces of resistance. Interestingly and with compelling evidence, Shalhoub-Kevorkian points out that international human rights discourse has done very little for Palestinian women in the context of occupation, asserting that, "The internal nationalist masculinity accepts the human rights discourse only when the perpetrator is an outsider" (p. 107) and that human rights discourse precludes resistance against an occupier but encourages destroying internal support systems (pp. 108-109), thus rendering Palestinian women even more vulnerable.

In one of the text's best chapters, Shalhoub-

Kevorkian reveals that in many of her interviews with women and girls, the term “weaponize” was used often and consistently from woman to woman. Utilizing very powerful personal accounts, Shalhoub-Kevorkian illustrates that ways in which women are transformed into physical and theoretical weapons. She highlights how Palestinian women are oversexualized and desexualized by the Palestinian community and the Israeli occupation forces in the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict to meet their needs for maintaining a form of hegemonic masculinity. For example, the threat of rape for Palestinian women may be perceived as exaggerated by some but, given the history of the use of rape or the threat of rape to disperse villages during the Nakba (catastrophe) in 1948, it becomes clear that such fears are reasonable. Conversely, women’s bodies are used as both fodder and shield by their menfolk, so as to obviate emasculation. Among Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s many examples that make this chapter more than compelling is a series of personal accounts from various women. For example, Faizeh endures humiliation at a flying checkpoint from both Israeli soldiers and young Palestinian men, both parties straining to exert their superiority over her. Khulood maintains her father’s manhood by being a “good” daughter, getting married at a young age, and producing male heirs. Nawal is prevented from working and earning an income to support her family because her father doesn’t want the community to feel sorry for him. Manal is forbidden from crying over her demolished home so her husband does not have to give into his own painful emotions. May is asked by her father to buy his cigarettes so that he is not humiliated by the Israeli occupation when he leaves the house. These examples fortify Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s claim that women’s bodies remain contested sites, used by both the occupiers and the local menfolk.

In her final discussion, Shalhoub-Kevorkian focuses on the ever-enveloping, omnipresent Israeli Separation Wall (ISW) and the ensuing spatial policies that severely alter the lives of Palestinians, and specifically the lives of women. Seemingly unrelated topics like personal identification, the physical location of one’s home and community, which school one attends or continues to attend, how often one is harassed by Israeli soldiers, and harassment by local males, especially taxi drivers, are all tied into the growing presence of the ISW. For many women, the wall and other forms of Israeli spatial policy contribute to an even greater feeling of *shatat*, or displacement. Yet, despite these difficulties, “Crossing the ISW and passing checkpoints is an insurgent subaltern activity that goes beyond the quotidian resistance

of displaced and imprisoned people” (p. 175). Shalhoub-Kevorkian thus commends women for “reconstruct[ing] a liberated space within an incarcerated context” (p. 183). In her conclusive chapter, Shalhoub-Kevorkian reflects upon the reasons she is drawn to her specific subject matter, citing the internalization of the personal narratives of her mother and mother-in-law as impetus for her research and activism. She further locates the margin as a site of resistance for conflict-affected women in general and for Palestinian women specifically, claiming their voices have the ability to challenge not only local masculine and militaristic hegemonic practices, but also empire.

Throughout her text, Shalhoub-Kevorkian rigorously points out that Palestinian women are placed in a precarious position many times over where they struggle to maintain the integrity of their communities and culture while at the same time maintaining their own integrity as women and as humans. As is outlined in the text, women are rarely able to prioritize their own needs before those of their families and communities, since to do so may cause a social rupture that irreparably alienates women and leaves them with few resources or options of support. Thus, women constantly negotiate and renegotiate between the needs of the family/community and their own needs, often prioritizing the latter.

In what is no doubt a contentious issue, Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict tends to focus only on the tragic, to the detriment of the Palestinians. In fact, in highlighting the power and agency of women in this dysfunctional setting, she conversely invokes the role of victim too strongly for the whole of the Palestinian cause when, in fact, such resistance runs parallel to women’s own resistance. Lastly, while some of the best chapters within the text include personal narratives, at times they are included without warning or without substantial context, leaving the reader to piece together the connection between claim, evidence, and analysis. Occasionally the text is somewhat convoluted and themes repeat themselves (in one instance, the same passage/personal story is presented in two different chapters, causing a moment of confusion). These flaws, however, are surmountable given the unique points of view rendered within *Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East* and its message of women’s agency employed under disempowering conditions.

#### Notes

- [1]. See Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its ‘New’*

*Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement, 1920 – 1948* (Berkeley:University of California Press, 2003).

[2]. See Phillipa Strum, *The Women Are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution* (Lawrence Hill Books, 1992); Julie Peteet, "Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone," *Signs* 23 (1997): 103-129; and Rosemary Sayigh, "Product and Producer of Palestinian History: Stereotypes of 'Self' in Camp Women's Life Stories," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3 (2007): 86-105.

[3]. Penny Johnson, "Point of Debate: The Human Rights Watch Report and Violence against Palestinian Women and Girls," *Review of Women's Studies, Birzeit University* 4 (2007): 95-104.

[4]. The Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) refers to the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, areas occupied, and illegally annexed in the case of East

Jerusalem, by Israel after the 1967 war. The situation in the Gaza Strip remains unresolved despite a settler pull-out in 2005. Israel continues to control Gaza's borders, airspace, and water, and refers to the Strip as an "enemy entity" as of 2007.

[5]. See Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and A. M. Baker, "Wife Abuse in Palestinian Society: Social Phenomenon or Social Problem?" *Arab Studies Quarterly* 19 (1997): 41-55.

[6]. See Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Mapping and Analyzing the Landscape of Femicide in Palestinian Society* (New York: UNIFEM, 2000), and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Re-examining Femicide: Breaking the Silence and Crossing 'Scientific' Borders," *Signs* 28 (2003): 581-608.

[7]. For a discussion on Orientalism, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

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