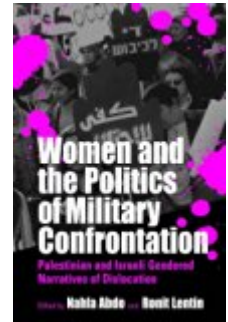


Nahla Abdo, Ronit Lentin, eds.. *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002. xi + 324 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-57181-459-3.



Reviewed by Penny Johnson

Published on H-Gender-MidEast (December, 2002)

Unsettling Accounts: Palestinian and Israeli Women Narrate Lives in Conflict

This ambitious and timely collection of essays by Palestinian and Israeli women, edited by Palestinian scholar Nahla Abdo and Israeli scholar Ronit Lentin (both in exile) is intriguingly uneven. The volume's mixture of personal narrative; testimonies; assertions of identity, pain, and anger; shrewd political analysis; and illuminating scholarly insight as well as the dissonances between Palestinian and Israeli experiences and viewpoints can be unsettling. This may be beneficial since, at the present, complacencies have no part in understanding either the profound crisis gripping Palestinian and Israeli polities and societies nor the present dangers to Palestinian lives and aspirations posed by Israel's resurgent right in the current global climate nor the gendered effects on both nations that ensue.

The introductory essay, consisting of an interesting exchange of e-mail letters between the two editors, suggests that Abdo and Lentin were often disconcerted as they pursued their common project of "writing dialogically" and editing diver-

sity (p. 1). Their goals were mutual but not identical. Lentin writes that "we must, as you say, challenge other nationalisms and ask whether feminism and nationalism are compatible in our lives and in the lives of our contributors" (p. 5). Abdo replies, "To be honest, due to my experience as a Palestinian in the diaspora and a citizen of Israel, I admit that my feminism, while anti-nationalistic, has not been anti-national" (p. 6). Both are acutely, even painfully, aware of asymmetries of power. When the two gave a presentation on "Diversity in Editing" at an Israeli feminist conference in Beit Berl in February 2000, the negative reaction generated another round of letters, reflection and unease, which is included in the introduction.

The seventeen contributions do not overtly continue the dialogic process; rather, Palestinian and Israeli women are separated editorially and do not necessarily address the same issues. However, a number of the essays have a silent partner on the other side. The least successful is "the other" as a rhetorical trope as, for example, in the Israeli "you" to whom Suad Dajani, living in the United States, addresses her assertion of identity

as a "Yaffiwe" (belonging to Jaffa); or when Alice Shavli uses her encounters with Palestinian women to show their misunderstandings of her own refugee experience. Perhaps this is also because Dajani and Shavli are asserting belonging, where other essays find knowledge in moments of non-belonging and in the tension between belonging and dislocation. Mazali, who also explores her mother's situation as a war widow ("National Widowhood in the New Jewish State"), was serving in the Israeli army in 1967. When a fellow soldier announced joyfully, in formal Hebrew, "We took the Old City," she feels incomprehension. "I knew I wasn't one of the 'we'" (p. 232). Yuval-Davis, a teenager whose questioning of military government in the Galilee made her a lowly army clerk rather than an officer like her sister, finds the conformity around her stifling and finds new belonging in a wider world. "It was shocking to discover that I had more in common with the non-Jewish hippies (the first non-Jews I had ever met in my life, except for Israeli Palestinians) that I met ... in the Dead Sea, than with all the people I grew up with and went to school with" (p. 253). In her adult life, Yuval-Davis offers a pleasantly contrary notion of belonging which dissenters in other cultures will recognize. "I discovered that I could still get angry more easily in Israel than anywhere else" (p. 259).

Given the historical context--many of these essays were written during the second Palestinian intifada--it is not surprising that the accounts of Palestinian women living in the West Bank, Gaza, and the Galilee are testimonies. "I woke up this morning to hear the shocking news of my mother's house's demolition," wrote Mona El Farra from Gaza (p. 160). Hala Manna, also writing from Gaza, gives "brief accounts of the lives, dreams, struggles and hopes of four refugee women" (p. 164). Two in particular, Um Luayy (who lost a son) and Ibtisam (who lost a husband) in the second Palestinian intifada, suggest not only the agony, but the complexities of these losses. Ibtisam, newly married and pregnant, is pressured to marry

her husband's brother, "a shadow of a man," in order to keep her child. "I felt I had to choose between my baby and my humanity ... I chose the former" (p. 174). Um Luayy, proud of her son, "began to explore a new position for herself" (p. 170), but vacillates between a desire to form a "mothers of martyrs" organization and returning home to fight through her children, an apt example of what Sayigh, in another contribution, calls the "participatory/symbolic contradiction" (p. 56).

These moving and thought-provoking accounts, however, are almost too brief. The reader does not know how either son or husband died and can only glimpse how family dynamics are altered in the aftermath. If the editors had worked with the authors to develop fuller profiles, it would have strengthened these valuable accounts. Here, the role of editors in presenting personal narratives or testimonies is perhaps a matter for discussion and dissension, particularly among feminist scholars. Given the pre-eminence of narratives in a range of feminist writing, the question is important: what are the responsibilities of editors (or authors) in editing or writing a life? The question is raised in other ways by the sometimes rambling nature of the personal narratives, which can border on both editorial and self-indulgence, as well as by the occasional stiffness of phrases translated from the Arabic. In her particularly strong contribution on mother-daughter relations in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Sayigh raises the question in the urgent context of the Palestinian intifada. "I question my academic purposes, my musings over the relationship between nationalism and feminism, my professional concerns as a writer to frame and analyze their raw words to become 'testimonial literature'" (p. 71).

Whatever the minor weaknesses of this collection, the editors and authors of *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation* have opened up this question for reflection. Shohat, for example, writing a "reluctant eulogy" of her childhood

memories as an "Arab-Jew" in an Iraqi Jewish family asks, "Can memory exist apart from the desire to memorialize" (p. 275)? Kervokian provides a conceptual framework of "decolonization of the mind" in which her narrative, along with those of other Palestinians, break silences. Svirsky's narrative of women's activism during the second Palestinian intifada breaks another silence, that of the media, where even readers located in Israel or Palestine need to be reminded of this submerged history. Sayigh illuminates the way "non-elite women's narratives unself-consciously crisscross the (politically constructed) boundary between 'public' and 'domestic,' narrating the national through the personal" (p. 57). Overall, the tensions, dislocations, and illuminations of these narratives provide avenues for new and more complicated understandings of gender and nationalism in this bitter and tragic phase of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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Citation: Penny Johnson. Review of Abdo, Nahla; Lentin, Ronit, eds. *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.

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