

MEMORY NARRATIVES AND PALESTINIAN WOMEN

Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gendered Memories, by Fatma Kassem. London and New York: Zed Books, 2011. viii + 241 pages. Notes to p. 249. Bibliography to p. 256. Index to p. 264. \$34.95 paper, \$126.95 cloth.

Reviewed by Anaheed Al-Hardan

Yitzhak Rabin was better known for his early role in the so-called peace process rather than for his role in the aerial bombardment, massacre, and expulsion of the people of al-Lydd and al-Ramlah in July 1948. The few families that survived and remained came under Israeli military rule. Fatima Kassam's book is an exploration of the life narratives of twenty of those women who remained in their natal towns of al-Lydd and al-Ramlah or sought refuge in towns from other destroyed localities.

The opening chapter is Kassem's recollections of narratives she heard while growing up in Bi'aneh, a village in the Upper Galilee that survived the Nakba. She recounts how her home was a key place for the telling of oral narratives, and thus active resistance to the Israeli

state's appropriation and the erasure of Arab Palestine after 1948. At the same time, she notes how the house itself was a gendered social setting, with its more "public" spaces, like the living room, the domain of her father's narrations. Her mother, from the destroyed village of Sabalan, felt more comfortable narrating in the "private" space of the kitchen. In comparing and contrasting the narratives of the Nakba that were recollected at home, Kassem argues that although qualitatively different and of equal value, women's narratives tend to be doubly silenced, not only by the Israeli state, to which narratives of its establishment through the destruction of Palestine and Palestinians are inherently irredentist, but also by a patriarchal society that devalues women's experiences and narratives. Thus, Kassem reads these narratives "with their reference to significance in resisting Zionist narratives and in challenging the Palestinian national narrative," on the one hand, and in order to illustrate "women's agency in constituting society and history" (p. 19), on the other.

In keeping with the feminist practice of locating herself as the researcher and making the hidden facets of the research process visible, Kassem devotes the second chapter to a discussion of the institutional context of her research and the third chapter to a discussion of her life story methodology. Although addressing the institutional context within which academic research is produced, and thus opening the way for a critical reflection on the hidden yet central facets of the research process, is usually discouraged, Kassem's discussion of her experiences as a doctoral student at Ben-Gurion University is testament to the centrality of these practices and the need to put them under the spotlight. In Kassem's case, this was all the more urgent in view of the ideological opposition to her proposed doctoral dissertation (the basis of her book) from a powerful "left" Zionist gatekeeper in the university's hierarchy. He demanded that she drop her descriptions of 1948 as Nakba and the systematic changing of Arabic place names in Palestine as "Hebraicization," and of her very intention of recording women's recollection of life in pre-1948 Palestine.

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Her discussion therefore also provides insight into the way Zionism silences and erases Palestinian history, and the entrenched day-to-day racism and discrimination encountered by Palestinian citizens of Israel.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Kassem analyses the narratives she collected around the themes of language, body, and home. She argues that her interviews borrow from the language of their everyday lives in order to narrate the Nakba. Through her analysis of the place of the gendered bodies in the narratives, Kassem demonstrates how her interviewees' narrate events through their association with embodied experiences, and thus how the body itself becomes a source of knowledge, resistance, and agency. It is the female body that persevered, rebuilt destroyed homes, uprooted families, and decimated communities. The third and final theme of home is loaded with symbolism and is one of the most pressing issues for the women of al-Lydd and al-Ramlah. Not only did these women witness the violation and usurpation of their homes before their own eyes, but home itself is both a collective and private space in their narratives: the home that was usurped for the Jewish state and the homes that were usurped by Jewish families.

Lucidly written with very little theoretical jargon, the main strength of Kassem's book is not only her rich and detailed reading of the narratives, but also her choice to situate herself as a researcher, dissecting the process of academic research production. In view of the social, political, and economic circumstances of her interviewees, it is somewhat inevitable that her reading of the narratives is set against the overarching themes of Zionism and Palestinian nationalism/patriarchy, and women's resistance, agency, and commemoration. This leaves the reader with a lingering curiosity about other potential ways to read these narratives, and about the lack of contradictory narratives and voices that are often the result of differing life circumstances. Nonetheless, Kassem achieves her stated goal of making the voices of her interviewees heard in academia, bearing in mind that these women's voices continue to exist

independently of their circulation as academic knowledge.