

*Understanding
Palestinian
Women: A
Critical
Assessment of
the Literature
on Women in
Palestine*

This paper attempts to contribute to the ongoing critical debate within feminist scholarship on Middle Eastern societies, and to raise a number of issues pertaining to the study of women and gender in Palestine⁽¹⁾. Many of these issues can also be raised about writings on women and gender on other Middle Eastern societies; however, the particular history and current reality of Palestinian society necessitates that particular attention be paid to problematic approaches and analyses arising out of the real and perceived uniqueness of Palestinian society.

Recent advances in Middle Eastern gender studies included the emergence of a historiography and critique of writings on gender in the Middle East. As gender analysis became more integrated into the various social science disciplines concerned with studying Middle Eastern societies, the awareness of the necessity to call into question prevailing analytical frameworks and assumptions became more pronounced. Early attempts at challenging dominant paradigms in the analysis of gender relations in the Middle East focused on the privileging of Islam in the analysis of social relations and practices in general, as well as problematizing the construct of the Muslim /Middle Eastern wom-

(1)The main focus in this paper is Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza, or that part of Palestine occupied by Israel since 1967. This paper is part of a larger project undertaken by the Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University in Palestine examining and assessing the literature on Palestine from a gender-aware perspective.

LIZA TARAKI

111

en⁽²⁾. Concerns about the hegemony of orientalist discourses in Middle Eastern studies have also generated a growing number of works⁽³⁾.

In a recent essay on contemporary feminist scholarship and Middle Eastern studies⁽⁴⁾, Deniz Kandiyoti attempts a periodization of the main currents of feminist thought and scholarship in the Middle East, and links this trajectory with that of feminist scholarship as developed mainly in Western academia, but not necessarily only as a response to or in dialogue or confrontation with it. Concluding that advances in feminist scholarship have been incorporated partially and selectively into Middle East studies, she identifies some features of the background against which Middle East gender studies have developed, most prominently the various experiences of decolonization, the Palestinian struggle, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and equally importantly, local feminist agendas and other less visible struggles.

When considering works on gender relations in Palestine - or to be more precise, on Palestinian women - we shall also attempt to consider some of the elements of the socio-historical context within which writings on Palestinian women can be situated. We shall also discuss why works on women and gender in Palestine show a remarkable immunity and insularity from current developments in feminist scholarship. While it may be expected and understandable that the analytical tools and concepts of feminist scholarship have not made serious inroads into local writing and scholarship, it is surprising to find that works produced by European and American-based researchers - both Palestinian and non-Palestinian - have not made use of the analytical and conceptual advances in gender studies in the centers of research and teaching in which most carry out their normal work. The reasons for this are complex, and involve methodological, personal, political, and cultural biases and assumptions.

(2) See, for example: Elizabeth Fernea and Bassima Bezirgan (eds.), *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1979); Nikki Keddie, «Problems in the Study of Middle Eastern Women.» *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (May 1979), pp. 225-240, and Judith Tucker, «Problems in the Historiography of Women in the Middle East: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Egypt.» *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 15, no.3 (August 1983), pp. 321-336.

(3) Some examples include Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Rosemary Sayigh, «Roles and Functions of Arab Women: A Reappraisal.» *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol.3, no.3 (Autumn 1981), and Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

(4) Deniz Kandiyoti, «Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies.» in: Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (London: Tauris, 1996), pp. 1-27.

1- Palestinian Writings on Women and Gender

Insofar as writings by Palestinians in Palestine itself are concerned, a number of intellectual, institutional, and political factors may explain the insularity of this literature from developments in feminist scholarship in general. In terms of intellectual and institutional factors, Palestinian society has not been able to create and sustain the kind of infrastructure and environment conducive to the production of knowledge in general, and in this lags behind other countries in the region. The conditions arising out of military occupation - including isolation from the rest of the Arab world - have precluded the development of a tradition of scholarship and the institutional underpinnings of its development.

This situation is compounded with regard to writing and research on gender. One of the factors here is the near total absence of scholarly legitimacy accorded to the study of matters having to do with gender, and more specifically, women. While feminist scholarship has by no means entirely legitimized itself elsewhere, it faces an added handicap in the Palestinian context, due to its isolation from both regional and global intellectual trends. However, it is not only isolation and the resultant withholding of legitimacy to gender studies which accounts for the poverty of work on gender and women in Palestine. A possibly stronger factor - which also accounts for the poverty of sociological and anthropological as opposed to political writings in general - is the preoccupation with the national question in Palestinian scholarly production. Women and gender have figured in this production only insofar as they could be related to the national struggle, primarily in the form of documenting and chronicling the contribution of women to the struggle for national self-determination. A plethora of writings by Palestinian women deals with women's place in and in relation to the national struggle, beginning with the Palestinian Resistance in the diaspora and in the Occupied Territories and ending with women's struggles during the popular uprising in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The situation, however, is more complex than presented thus far. While the national struggle may have eclipsed the development of inquiry into other aspects of society - including gender relations - writings on women have been burdened by another, seemingly contradictory influence, which has also precluded the development of more critical lines of inquiry and investigation. We refer here to the near-hegemony of conceptualizations of Palestinian society as traditional, and of the notion that the main impediments to women's emancipation are oppressive belief systems, norms and even practices. The paradox of women as active and autonomous political actors

against the backdrop of an oppressive cultural apparatus has not yet been confronted directly.

Interest in the «woman question» in Palestine can be clearly linked with the emergence of what has been called the «new women's movement» in the 1970s, and with concurrent developments within the Palestinian Resistance. Two works produced by Palestinians in exile, Ghazi al-Khalili's *Palestinian Women and the Revolution*⁽⁵⁾ and Khadija Abu-'Ali's *Prolegomena on the Reality and Experience of Women in the Palestinian Revolution*⁽⁶⁾ were widely read by women activists in the Occupied Territories, and set the tone for much of the writings well into the following decade. This literature, which mostly took the form of reports, pamphlets, and articles in journals and magazines, was produced by the growing cadres of young politicized women - mostly on the left - who formed the backbone of the women's movement. While some of this literature, such as the pioneering field study of women's conditions conducted in the late 1970s⁽⁷⁾ combines scholarly methodology with activist purpose, much of it was decidedly political and was meant to advance the cause of women's mobilization into the national struggle and agitate for increasing the visibility and effectiveness of women in the movement and in society.

It is not the place here to discuss the remarkable success of the women's movement in the Occupied Territories in mobilizing and politicizing women; on the conceptual and theoretical level, however, knowledge of women's condition was advanced very little beyond the standard formulations which became increasingly sterile: Palestinian women - as other Arab women - suffer under the yoke of oppressive traditions and practices, their suffering is compounded by the Israeli occupation, and the integration of women into the struggle first and, into the workforce second, will enhance women's condition as women.

While we shall be examining in more depth the problematic deployment of «traditionality» as an explanatory device in works produced both in and outside Palestine, it is important to point out the existence of fixed and immutable «traditions» and norms governing practices and obstructing the advancement of women has been one of the «givens» of the prevalent discourse. As such, it has not encouraged the investigation of the changing

(5) Ghazi Al-Khalili, *Palestinian Women and the Revolution* (Beirut: [n.p.], 1977) (in Arabic).

(6) Khadija Abu-'Ali, *Prolegomena on the Reality and Experience of Women in the Palestinian Revolution* ([n.p.], 1977) (in Arabic).

(7) Women's work Committee, *On the Condition of Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territories: A Field Study* (Ramallah-Al-Bireh: [n.p.], 1980) (in Arabic).

material conditions within which women and men carry out their lives, and the different contexts and circumstances in which «tradition» is invoked, challenged, or simply overlooked, aside from the fact that tradition itself is a historical construct⁽⁸⁾.

It may be countered at this point that it is unfair to judge polemical writings by the standards of social science and from the vantage point of academic feminism. Indeed, the bulk of writings during this period and beyond were not produced by scholars. Research in the social sciences and humanities related to gender and women was taken up by a few individuals studying at universities abroad or recently returned therefrom⁽⁹⁾. It would be more appropriate, therefore, to view writings on women as weapons of social criticism and protest in an environment highly supportive of the national struggle and paying lip service to the value of women's political participation without this being reflected in actual practice on the ground.

The Palestinian uprising of the late 1980s and early 1990s catapulted Palestinian women onto the world stage, and pushed into prominence images of women engaged in street battles, leading popular committees, and assisting the resistance. It was during this period of political turmoil that a new genre of writings by Palestinian academics began to appear in local and international journals. Critical of some of the prevailing understandings of women's role in the national movement, writings beginning in this period began to examine more critically women's place in the national struggle and to raise questions related to the prospects of women's emancipation⁽¹⁰⁾.

It has become a commonplace to note that as the uprising began to lose its momentum and mass character, a «new» feminist agenda began to be articulated by the women's movement. One significant manifestation of the new course the women's movement was charting for itself was the establishment

(8) Some of these points are also raised in Rema Hammami, «Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and the Literature on Palestinian Women,» in: *Gender and Society: Working Papers* (Birzeit: Women's Studies Program, Birzeit University, 1995), pp. 17-26.

(9) Examples are Randa Siniara, «Palestinian Labor in a Dependent Economy: the case of Women in the Sub-Contracting Clothing Industry in the West Bank,» (M.A. thesis, American University in Cairo, 1987); Rita Giacaman, *Life and Health in Three Palestinian Villages* (Ithaca Press, 1988); Suad Aamiry, «Space, Kinship, and Gender: The Social Dimension of Peasant Architecture in Palestine,» (Ph.D. dissertation, Edinburgh University, 1987), and Eileen Kuttab, «Palestinian Women's Challenges,» (M.A. Thesis, Northeastern University, 1981).

(10) Some examples include Islah Jad, «From Salons to the Popular Committees: Palestinian Women, 1919-1989,» in: Jamal Nassar and Roger Heacock (eds.), *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads* (New York: Praeger, 1990), pp. 125-142; Eileen Kuttab, «The Uprising and Some Social Issues Pertaining to Women,» in: *The Intifada and Some Social Issues Pertaining to Women* (Ramallah: Bisan Center for Development, 1991), pp. 31-38 (in Arabic); Eileen Kuttab, «Palestinian Women in the Intifada: Fighting on Two Fronts,» *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 15, no.2 (Spring 1993), pp. 69-85; Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson, «Palestinian Women: Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers,» in: Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinen (eds.), *Intifada: the Palestinian Uprising Against the Israeli Occupation* (South End Press, 1989), pp. 155-169, and Rema Hammami, «Women, the Hijab, and the Intifada,» *Middle East Report*, no.164-165 (May-August 1990), pp. 24-30.

of a number of «independent» women's organizations combining research with activism. In the Palestinian case, this means institutions with no direct affiliations with political parties (as had been the case with the women's committees frameworks put in place in the 1970s). The emergence of these organizations, which have begun to monopolize the terms and parameters of feminist research and activism, can be viewed partly as manifestations of a «backlash» of sorts against the politically affiliated women's committees; independence is meant to signify seriousness of commitment to a feminist agenda unaltered by factional interests. In broader terms, the emergence of these organizations can be viewed as part of a larger development in Palestinian society, namely the transformation of many mass-based projects and initiatives into «professional» bureaucratized institutions, as well as the emergence of independent research, development and community work organizations with the new collective identity of «NGOs»⁽¹¹⁾.

A concomitant development that was to have far reaching consequences for both NGOs and the women's organizations - and for the kind of research and activism undertaken by them - was the launching of the process of negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis. With the prospects - dim or immediate - of some form of autonomy for Palestinians, women began to insert themselves into the state-building project and to position themselves for the fight for more equitable legislation and social policies, and for a role within the emerging political system. Research and training became twin slogans of the new genre of women's activism, propelled and fueled in great part by increasing funds from international organizations. While the issue of international aid determining research and policy agendas has been taken up in other national contexts and is a separate subject, it may be sufficient to point out here that, particularly after the signing of the Oslo Accords, international aid agencies have been an important influence upon Palestinian NGOs' projects and programs.

It is important to note that alongside these new forms of professional and academic activism, a growing interest was developing in studying the actual material and social contexts in which women were situated. Beginning in the late 1980s, we began to see the emergence of a more academic style of work which has contributed to our understanding of women's lives, particularly in the area of work and production. Hindiyyeh, et al.'s study of women street peddlers, Hindiyyeh and Ghazawneh's study of women workers in factories,

(11) An account and analysis of this trend where «NGOs became separated from political parties and isolated from the grassroots community» can be found in Rema Hammami, «NGOs: The Professionalisation of Politics,» *Race and Class*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1995), pp.51-63.

Lang and Mohanna's book on refugee women's waged and non-waged labor, and the Women's Affairs Center's study of women in the informal economy are all examples of works in this genre⁽¹²⁾. The journal *Women's Affairs*, of which several issues have been published since 1991 by the Women's Affairs Center in Nablus, was an important venue for the publication of work on women's domestic and waged work, fertility, health, and marriage patterns.

Methodologically, many of the studies undertaken in Palestine today suffer from what a Palestinian sociologist has called a local academic obsession with an empiricism that requires quantitative certainties⁽¹³⁾. Lack of exposure to the full range of methods of inquiry available to the researcher has resulted in a situation where the «scientific» value of any undertaking is judged by the length of the questionnaire and the number of tables that can be generated from the data. Given scarce resources, sample sizes are extremely small in many cases, and interpretation of findings from such small-scale studies suffers from the additional problem of lack of contextuality; little use of documents and structured interviews is made, and the historical depth of many of the studies produced is extremely shallow.

While the works referred to above constitute important beginnings for the understanding of women's condition in Palestine, gender studies still have a long way to go. In her essay on feminist scholarship on the Middle East, Deniz Kandiyoti identifies some of the more fruitful and promising directions feminist scholarship may take in the future: analyses of the cultural processes as well as the different institutions through which gender hierarchies are produced and contested, such as the family, educational institutions, the market, and the state⁽¹⁴⁾. With the exception of economic activity, none of these institutional domains has received the kind of attention required for the critical investigation of gender hierarchies and gender-based discrimination, identity formation, and division of labor. The family and household, for example, presumed to be the prime locus of women's existence, has had virtu-

(12) Suha Hindiyeh, [et. al.], «Women Street Peddlers: the Phenomenon of Bastat in the Palestinian Informal Economy,» in: Tamar Mayer (ed.), *Women and the Israeli Occupation: the Politics of Change* (London and N.Y.: Routledge, 1994), pp. 147-163 (first published in Arabic as Occasional Paper no. 5 by Birzeit University's *Afaq Filistiniyya* journal in 1991); Suha Hindiyeh and Afaf Ghazaweh, *Female Workers in Palestinian Factories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip* (Jerusalem: Women's Studies Center, 1993) (in Arabic); Erica Lang and Itimad Mohanna, *A Study of Women and Work in Shatti' Refugee Camp of the Gaza Strip* (Jerusalem: Arab Thought Forum, [n.d.]) (in both Arabic and English), and Women's Affairs Center, [et. al.], *Self-Employed Women in the Informal Economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (Nablus, 1994).

(13) See Salim Tamari, «Problems of Social Science Research in Palestine: An Overview,» *Current Sociology*, vol.42, no.2 (Summer 1994), p. 75.

(14) Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, pp. 17-18.

ally no place in the research agendas of individual researchers or institutions⁽¹⁵⁾.

Another virtually unexplored terrain demanding critical feminist analysis is what we may broadly call nationalist cultural production, including works in the national heritage genre, poetry, fiction, and the visual arts. While the nationalist discourse has been broadly defined and its role in reproducing gender hierarchies subjected to critical analysis by feminist scholars in other colonial and postcolonial societies, there is still a considerable distance to be traversed in the Palestinian context. Notable exceptions are Ilham Abu-Ghazaleh's critical essays on the poetry of the uprising and the fiction of Ghassan Kanafani⁽¹⁶⁾, and Suha Sabbagh's work on women writers⁽¹⁷⁾.

2 - Women Writing About Women from the Outside

It may be appropriate at this point to ask whether it is desirable or necessary for the question of positionality to enter into a discussion of works on Palestinian women. Bringing with it as is inevitable the question of motive, it may be asked whether it is at all relevant to allow the question of the identity of an author to enter into the assessment of her or his work. In the case of Palestine, however, this is unavoidable. Studying Palestine and the Palestinians is not a «normal» activity as is, let us say, the study of Egypt and the Egyptians. It may thus be safe to say that the vast majority of those writing on Palestine - and Palestinian women at that - have arrived at their destination through routes which inevitably involve landmarks heavily laden with personal significance. This is particularly the case with two categories of writers, Palestinians in exile on the one hand, and Jewish Americans and Europeans or Israelis on the other. A general characteristic of the literature - with very few exceptions - has been the sense of mission with which it is infused; most writers are sympathetic to or identify with the Palestinian cause, and their work is often polemical.

(15) Exceptions are Majdi Al-Maliki and Khamis Al-Shalabi, *Socioeconomic Transformations in Three Palestinian Villages: the Conditions for the Reproduction of Peasant Families under the Occupation* (Jerusalem: Ma'an Center for Development, 1993) (in Arabic), and Marianne Heiberg and Geir Ovansen (eds.), *Palestinian Society in Gaza, West Bank and Arab Jerusalem: a Survey of Living Conditions* (Oslo: FAFO, 1993). Although the latter work is not strictly produced by Palestinians, a number of Palestinian researchers participated in the design and analysis of the results of this household survey.

(16) Kanafani was a prominent figure in the Palestinian Resistance in exile, is revered by Palestinians. A feminist critique of his writings requires considerable courage in this context. See: Ilham Abu-Ghazaleh, «Women in Intifada Poetry,» *Al-Kateb*, no.110, pp. 65-76, and «Women in the Writings of Ghassan Kanafani,» *Al-Kateb*, no.124, pp. 53-64 (both in Arabic).

(17) Suha Sabbagh, «Palestinian Women Writers and the Intifada,» *Social Text: Theory/Culture/Ideology*, vol.22 (Spring 1989), pp. 62-78. While Sabbagh was not resident in Palestine at the time, this work was translated into Arabic and circulated by the Women's Affairs Center as a booklet in 1992.

The issue of identity is important insofar as it has, by and large, influenced the way in which questions are framed and what is deemed important to study. For example, several Jewish scholars have taken both Israeli and Palestinian women as their subject; inevitably, comparisons are drawn, symmetries or asymmetries are explored, discourses of the two «nationalisms» are dissected for similarities and dissimilarities, and prospects for joint feminist action across the political divide are pondered⁽¹⁸⁾. Palestinian emigre scholars have also approached their subject with heavy baggage: to counteract orientalist representations of Arab women with images of women in struggle, or simply to set the historical record straight.

There is another sense in which some authors' positions as outsiders have had consequences for the nature, quality, and depth of works produced. This is directly linked with the question of research methodology, which has by and large consisted of interviews, often in the framework of the case study, the profile, or the diary⁽¹⁹⁾. With the exception of a few European-or American-based scholars spending considerable time in the country and using a variety of methods of inquiry⁽²⁰⁾, most of the research conducted by outsiders is completed in a relatively short time and relies almost exclusively on interviews. It may be noted that the interview - and in this case we are speaking mainly of the structured interview - as a main instrument for gaining access to the lives of women is fraught with difficulties, particularly if compounded by problems of translation and interpretation. The burden placed on the respondent by the researcher to somehow «represent» Palestinian women is one problem, and raises the question of the relation between the subject and the researcher in an environment where the opportunity to make the cause heard is rarely passed up⁽²¹⁾. The question of representativeness and typicali-

(18) Several recent works have explored these issues: Sheila Hannah Katz, «Adam and Adama, 'Ird and Ard: Engendering Political Conflict and Identity in Early Jewish and Palestinian Nationalisms,» in: Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, pp. 85-105; Simona Sharoni, *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Elise Young, *Keepers of the History: Women and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Teachers College Press, 1992) and, Tamar Mayer, «Women and the Israeli Occupation,» in: Tamar Mayer (ed.), *Women and the Israeli Occupation: the Politics of Change* (London and N.Y.: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-15.

(19) There have in fact been a number of works in this genre recently: Philippa Strum, *The Women are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution* (West part C.T: Lawrence Hill, 1992); Orayb Aref Najjar, *Portraits of Palestinian Women* (University of Utah Press, 1992); Sherna Berger Gluck, *An American Feminist in Palestine: the Intifada Years* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) and, Amal Kavar, *Daughters of Palestine: Leading Women of the Palestinian National Movement* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

(20) The works of Judith Tucker, Annelies Moors, and Orayb Najjar come to mind. Tucker and Najjar made extensive use of archival material, and Moors spent a considerable time in the field. See: Judith Tucker, «The Arab Family in History: Otherness' and the study of the Family,» in: Judith Tucker (ed.), *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers* (Blumington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 195-207; Annelies Moors, «Gender Relations and Inheritance: Person, Power and Property in Palestine,» in: Deniz Kandiyoti, *ibid.*, pp. 69-84 (this article is based on research conducted for a Ph.D. at Amsterdam University) and, Orayb Najjar, *ibid.*

(21) Sherna Gluck is one of the few who have brought this delicate issue up for public scrutiny and discussion. See: Sherna Berger Gluck, «Advocacy Oral History: Palestinian Women in Resistance,» in: Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (ed.), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London and N.Y.: Routledge, 1991), pp. 205-219.

ty also arises in this context, especially if the case study/profile method is used. An additional problem is the choice of respondents; paucity of local contacts and the short time available to complete research inevitably lead to selectivity and even bias in the selection of respondents.

A more serious problem with the interview is analytical. It was mentioned at the beginning of this paper that many writings on Palestinian women, even by those positioned in academic environments abroad, have been strangely immune from recent critical trends in feminist scholarship on the Middle East⁽²²⁾. One aspect of this is the adoption of an analytical framework which accords disproportionate explanatory weight to cultural and ideological factors in the study of women's realities. Palestinian informants' role in further entrenching this perspective must be acknowledged in this regard; they, by and large, confirm a priori assumptions about gender relations that outsiders bring with them, thus giving «native» legitimation to assumptions, biases, and even prejudices.

It may be appropriate to present a few examples from writings on Palestinian women to illustrate how authors become locked into ahistorical, essentialistic generalizations about gender relations which in turn are accorded explanatory weight. *Palestinian Women: Identity and Experience*, which is a collection of narratives, accounts and articles written by Palestinian women and edited by Ebba Augustin, opens with the following: «Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza is hierarchical and male-dominated, with clearly defined roles and norms for men and women and gender separation... Women are perceived as totally dependent on their menfolk for protection and maintenance...»⁽²³⁾. An essay by Yvonne Haddad in one of the first volumes on Palestinian society, contends that «the role and status of women in the *hamula* system has been defined by centuries of cultural patterns and social restrictions and justified by religious sanctions... Centuries of religious commitment have solidified cultural customs so that [a wife's] obedience has become, in the Palestinian case, a pattern of indentivity»⁽²⁴⁾. Kitty Warnock, in *Land Before Honour: Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territories*, alerts the reader that she will use for convenience the past tense to describe Pales-

(22) One of the exceptions is Canadian-based Nahla Abdo. See: Nahla Abdo-Zubi, *Family, Women and Social Change in the Middle East: the Palestinian Case* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 1987); «Women of the Intifada: Gender, Class and National Liberation,» *Race and Class*, vol. 32, no.4 (1991), pp. 19-34, and «Nationalism and Feminism: Palestinian Women and the Intifada - No Going Back?» in: Valentine M. Moghadam (ed.), *Gender and National Identity*,» (London: Zed Books, 1994), pp. 148-171.

(23) Ebba Augustin, «Introduction,» in: Ebba Augustin (ed.), *Palestinian Women: Identity and Experience* (London: Zed Books, 1993), p. 3.

(24) Yvonne Haddad, «Palestinian Women: Patterns of Legitimation and Domination,» in: Khalil Nakhleh and Elia Zureik (eds.), *The Sociology of the Palestinians*, p. 148.

tine's traditional society, not wishing to «suggest that the traditional social structures and relationships have passed into history... Palestinian women of today grow up within a framework of ideals and restrictions which, although relaxed since their mothers' or grandmothers' days, has not fundamentally changed»⁽²⁵⁾. Another example comes from the universe of international agencies, in this case the Gender-in-Development Program of the UNDP: «Social traditions are particularly important in Arab society since that society inherited the tradition of the separation of the worlds of men and women, which provides a clear division of responsibilities and labour»⁽²⁶⁾.

It may seem paradoxical that the very writings which valorize Palestinian women's role in the national struggle are largely informed by underlying assumptions about «tradition» and its determination of women's status and potentials. With the exception of the more academic works exploring women's concrete lived reality, most of the writings on Palestinian women were produced during or in the aftermath of the popular uprising, a time during which women's mobilization in the struggle was the most visible.

3 - The Muslim/Middle Eastern Woman

In more general terms, it is important to note two features of explanation of social practices and behavior by reference to «tradition». First, it seems that it is almost exclusively confined to the case of non-Western societies. The assumption appears to be that non-Western societies, and particularly Middle Eastern societies, are still under the grip of immutable traditional value systems, while the industrialized Western nations have been liberated from them. The almost mandatory prefacing of any discussion of women's current realities by a discussion of the traditional context is an outstanding example of this approach⁽²⁷⁾. It would indeed be very strange to see a discussion of French, Swedish or American women's lives framed similarly, as if to say that we could not hope to understand their current realities before first setting out the **traditional** context of gender relations. Second, the reference to traditional norms and values is almost invariably produced when matters concerning gender relations, roles, and identities are at issue.

(25) Kitty Warnock, *Land before Honour: Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territories* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 20.

(26) UNDP, *At the Crossroads: Challenges and Choices for Palestinian Women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip* (New York: UNDP, 1994), p. xiii. A fuller critique of this and other reports issued by international agencies on Palestine can be found in: Lisa Taraki, «Society and Gender in Palestine: A Critique of International Agency Policy Documents.» Working Paper no.2, Birzeit University, Women's Studies Program, 1995.

(27) The works by Warnock and Haddad and the UNDP publication mentioned earlier are good examples.

How can we understand social practices and behavioral patterns that appear on the face of it to be dictated by traditional values and norms? For example, how do we explain the apparent disenfranchisement of women in the inheritance of property, or the strictures imposed on women's work outside the home?

To address these and other questions we must first appreciate the fact that norms and values are historical constructs above all, that they are in no society «handed down» from generation to generation without undergoing redefinition and reformulation. This process of alteration is itself conditioned by changing social realities, and reflects the struggle between different social groups and collectivities in pursuit of their particular and common interests.

A prime example is the presumably timeless «honor code» believed to regulate women's conduct in Muslim Middle Eastern societies. Even a casual acquaintance with social practices and values in these societies reveals that the meaning of «honor» has changed considerably over the past decades, as has what constitutes the violation of the honor code. Furthermore, contending social and political groups - and men and women - are constantly negotiating the definition and boundaries of honor.

We must also consider the possibility that certain values and norms are group- and class-specific and not generalizable at the level of whole societies. How the process of generalization takes place is itself a subject for investigation since it may become clear that a host of factors come into play in the designation of values and norms as universal. Women's seclusion in the home, for instance, has not been the practice for the majority of women in Middle Eastern societies, whether in rural or urban areas, since one of the main requirements for seclusion is the freedom from work in the field, the neighborhood, or other public places.

Even assuming that social practices are in some general way «governed» - or explained - by traditional norms and values and are seen as such by individuals in the society involved, it is still important to ask what other, more concrete and material factors may also account for those practices. Doing so will enable us to see traditional values, norms, and attitudes within the overall context of the material conditions and social relationships prevailing in society. It will also assist in making us more sensitive to the fluidity of social practices as they are conditioned by changing material circumstances. It may be added that such an exercise would also be intellectually more satisfying, since attributing diverse social practices and behavioral patterns to some timeless and amorphous body of «traditions» hardly satisfied the criterion of scholarly rigor.

The preceding discussion has brought to light a further point which is important to recognize concerning Palestinian women. For even though we speak of Palestinian «women», we must recognize that women's status, opportunities, power, and lifestyles are conditioned by their social class, the environment in which they live (town, village, or refugee camp), the amount of education they have, the size of their families, their position within the family life cycle, their marital status, and finally, their age. It is understandable, however, that many of the works, fuelled as they have been by a sense of mission and a desire to correct stereotypes, have ignored these realities.