

Record: 1**Title:** Book reviews.**Authors:** Beydoun, Lina**Source:** Arab Studies Quarterly. Winter96, Vol. 18 Issue 1, p103. 4p.**Document Type:** Book Review**Subjects:** PORTRAITS of Palestinian Women (Book)**Abstract:** Reviews the book 'Portraits of Palestinian Women,' by Orayb Aref Najjar.**Lexile:** 1380**Full Text Word Count:** 1629**ISSN:** 0271-3519**Accession Number:** 9605233890**Database:** MAS Ultra - School Edition**BOOK REVIEWS**

Orayb Aref Najjar. Portraits of Palestinian Women. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992. 312 pp., including index. Paper \$14.95.

Portraits of Palestinian Women reflects on the conflicts and tensions within Palestinian society, mainly due to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Contrary to popular belief in the West, it is neither religion nor ethnicity that creates these conflicts; rather it is an issue of land and/or property confiscation. In addition, the book attempts to counter the stereotypes that originate in the West about Arab, Muslim, or Middle Eastern women, and their culture in general.

The interviews with twenty-one Palestinian women depict a certain confusion of roles arising from the chaotic situation of life under occupation. In a society continuously threatened by military oppression, women struggling to enhance their status in society confront other forms of social oppression inside their family circles, due to their under-privileged socio-economic background, or because of Palestinian fundamentalist groups that tend to perpetuate traditional roles by emphasizing the veil and confining women's place to the home. Basically, Palestinian women face two frustrating battles, an exposed one against the occupation which is permissible by the entire society, and a more "serene" battle in which they struggle to be noticed and recognized as women who have an effective role in the functioning of society.

Through interviews with women of various generations and backgrounds, Najjar inquires into whether or not social change regarding the status of women in Palestinian society may have occurred. Further, if changes in the way women are viewed did occur, she explores the problem of how to make them structural in order to render them permanent.

In general, political conditions in the country may have been advantageous to the position of women. Ironically, the occupation may not have exacerbated the condition of women. Rather, it may have been a driving force for many women to become actively involved in political and nationalistic issues; while at the same time enabling them to create a "stage" from which they could demand their rights. More recently, the uprising (Intifada) allowed Palestinian women to be more active than ever before.

The book also gives insight into why certain traditions, like early or arranged marriages, may have persisted in the society. There are economic reasons for forcing women to marry early, since they are not viewed as the

breadwinners of the household and are not expected to have an income. This may justify why men are taken better care of from childhood, and are even fed better than women. In addition, arranged marriages allow inheritance to be kept under family control rather than being dissipated.

Rosemary Sayigh identifies factors responsible for social change in the position of Palestinian women. She states that "class, sect, and region appear to be critical factors including family attitudes towards its female members, with middle-class Christians of the coastal cities among the first to adopt liberal practices, and with conservatism appearing most resistant in the rural hinterland, provincial towns, and among lower middle social strata" (p. 19).

Although the women interviewed are of different socio-economic classes, localities, and background, they share in common their Palestinian identity and their ability to cope with the continuous interruptions in their lives or careers owing to the Israeli occupation. Most of them are strong, persistent women, and some have succeeded in blending their roles as child-rearers with their roles as economic providers for their families. However, these women may not be a representative sample of all Palestinian women. It is clear that most of the former had the opportunity or incentive to change their traditional roles. Whether being a lawyer, professor, teacher, journalist, artist, or a leader of a women's organization, they certainly have taken steps to enhance their status in society. Indeed, Zahira Kamal, a leader of a women's organization, believes that although Palestinian society is not rigid and responds to changes brought about by the education of women, the main problem is to extend those advantages to all women in all social strata (p. 141). By itself, the refugee population plays a significant role in Palestinian society, and the two refugee women interviewed in the book explain the severe difficulties they encounter living in a camp. Najah Manasrah was the first from her refugee camp of 12,000 to attend university; she later became a researcher.

Unfortunately, although the portrayals suggest that Palestinian women suffer from many of the same problems, solidarity is not always apparent. Although Fadwa Hussein and Tahani Ali, for instance, come from the same rural background, Fadwa thinks that her struggle to earn an education was not because of the occupation but because of the social norms. On the other hand, Tahani complains that her aim to earn a university degree was interrupted by the continuous shutting down of the university by military officers.

Moreover, women leaders or activists who challenged the occupation or took up a national cause often perpetuated their traditional roles and were reluctant to define the women's movement in terms of changes in gender relations, modification of laws, or the equitable division of household labor. The main justification given by these leaders was that Palestinian women should give priority to fighting the occupation and not to members of their family or to society itself. Samiha Khalil, a leader of a very popular women's organization, for instance, encourages women to have a large number of children, in spite of the economic and health burdens this may cause. In Khalil's opinion, high birth rates will increase the number of Palestinians and thereby strengthen their position in opposing the occupation.

Under the occupation, women cope with many daily difficulties like town curfews and shortages of food, water, and electricity. However, the problems emphasized in the book are the confiscation of land, demolition of property, and town arrest or imprisonment. Inhuman treatment is exposed in several personal stories. Aisheh Shamlawi, a farmer, describes the tragic story of how Israeli authorities confiscated 150 dunums of her family's land, their only source of income. "I now sit in the streets of Nablus and beg", she says (p. 82). Rawda Basiir, who spent eight years in prison, led a prisoner's strike to establish the right of women to be treated as political prisoners. Salima Kumsiyya describes how the Israeli authorities demolished her house which she and her husband spent twenty years to build, because her son confessed to throwing a stone at an Israeli vehicle. Finally, Siham Barghuti relates how a series of town arrest orders, her imprisonment, and the imprisonment and subsequent deportation of her husband have made it difficult for the couple to lead a normal married life.

In these portrayals, the military governor recurrently emerges as a symbolic figure of power and oppression, bringing dismay and shock to the Palestinian population. However, the general pattern that transcends these portrayals is left for the readers to grasp. Najjar's conclusion does not analyze the individual cases described but only elaborates the barriers faced by Palestinian women in their struggle for equality between the sexes.

In general, one may conclude that women in Palestine suffer from national, class, and social oppression. In spite of that, the gender discrimination issue is often ignored by women's groups. Instead, they focus on the nationalist issue. Moreover, women's committees differ from the women's movement in the West in that they do not seek to change the traditional role of women, but rather attempt to ease their burdens by providing day care centers. Only a minority of educated women raise the issue of men doing more housework and parenting. While males are still given preference over females in high school and university education, females, at the same time, are still encouraged to marry young. In addition, although the number of Palestinian women working outside the home has increased steadily over the years, their professions are not considered as serious as child care and housework.

Portraits of Palestinian Women takes us on a journey into the West Bank, making us understand the Palestinian situation through the personal accounts of a number of its residents. The book is also a portrayal of occupation through women's unique, determined, and intense participation in the ongoing struggles.

In general, problems faced by Palestinian women and Palestinian society cannot be separated from those in other parts of the Arab region. Women in such a culture must attain legal, social, economic, and educational rights not granted to them owing to the persistence of a patriarchal system. Nevertheless, there are certain problems created by the occupation which are indigenous to Palestinian society. Under conditions of occupation, there is lack of a Palestinian government, and this has increased the burden placed on Palestinian women. Although Palestinians should not entirely blame the existing inequalities between sexes and classes on the present political conditions, it is not the desire of the Israeli occupiers to allow planning for a new and more just society. However, these interviews were conducted before Israel partially withdrew from Gaza and allowed the establishment of a Palestinian Authority. As such, it is predicted that the situation of Palestinian women under partial Palestinian authority may change in the future. However since only part of their dilemma stems from the occupation, leaders of women's organizations must be aware of the fact that now is the time for them to demand their rights. Having participated equally in the struggle against occupation, and this included martyrdom, street strikes, imprisonment, town arrests, and institution building, their rights as equal participants in the functioning of the Palestinian society ought to be recognized.

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