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Palestinian Feminist Critique and the Physics of Power: Feminists Between Thought and Practice

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The Palestinian woman in the Jewish state is a woman who confronts and defies bio-political, geopolitical and necropolitical Zionist settler colonialism, as well as socio-patriarchal oppression. The various forms of oppression facing Palestinian women, and the discrimination that violates their rights (Rouhana, 1997), along with the Israeli state's structural violence (Rouhana and Sultani, 2003) have proliferated. These forms of oppression have taken on various hues as a result of the economic stranglehold tightening its grip on the Palestinian community, attacks on the fabric and unity of Palestinian society, and the rise of masculinist ideologies, which have been reproduced, reconstructed and amplified alongside and through the growth of Zionist policies. As pointed out by black feminists and Third World Women scholars and activists, the Zionist settler colonial regime, like other settler colonial structures (e.g. Smith, 2005), sought to manipulate patriarchal forces within the colonized society, which have continued to gather strength since the 1948 *Nakba*, or "catastrophe", as Palestinians name the Arab-Israeli war that followed the establishment of the state of Israel.

Exploiting the trauma that had befallen the Palestinian people, and the resulting fear and confusion (Sa'di, 2005), Zionist authorities selected a number of individuals and "notables" to

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whom they granted a small amount of power. An official endorsement as a *Mukhtar* (chief) or

Wajih (notable) deluded these chosen individuals into thinking they still had influence and bore

responsibility for their communities (Cohen, 2006; Hassan, 1999). At the same time, the state

continued to kill, confiscate land, enact racist laws including demographically oriented

regulations, and attempted to negate Palestinian identity by controlling their bodies, lives, and

educational institutions. The state has also continued to harass and imprison intellectuals, along

with other draconian measures (Zureik et al, 2011). Women living in such contexts are

considered producers of Palestinians. Their bodies and productivity, as Israeli demographers

argue (Shargai, 2010; Sofer and Shalev, 2004), are perceived as "demographic threats" that

should be incapacitated. Portraying women as biopolitical threats to the existence of the settler

colonial power, added to the geo-political need to dispossess their land and constrain them

spatially, has effectively framed Palestinians as feared entities that can't be trusted (e.g. Kassem,

2011)

Grounded in the knowledge produced through my own position as a Palestinian feminist born

and raised in Haifa, this paper delves into the nature of feminism for Palestinian women in the

Jewish settler colonial state by asking three main questions:

1. How does the complex socio-political reality of settler colonialism reflect itself in the

    lives and status of Palestinian women living in Israel?

2. What kind of critical feminist theorizing is needed from Palestinian feminists in Israel?

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3. How can we analyze and confront the racism of the historical silence of the majority of Israeli feminists towards the historical injustice and current violence faced by Palestinian feminists?

How does the complex socio-political reality of settler colonialism reflect itself in the lives and status of Palestinian women?

The status of Palestinian women in the Jewish state is embedded in the structural violence of Zionist ideology. The violence of settler colonialism, specific to the Jewish state (with its two unique theologies, the biblical one of the "Chosen people in the promised land", and the "securitized" one, supporting policies of dispersion, displacement, massacres, and ongoing historical injustice) has led to the marginalization of Palestinians, men and women alike, in historic Palestine, and to their confinement in isolated bantustans. Not only were Palestinians who tried to return to their homes following the *Nakba* criminalized and defined as "infiltrators", the state also translated its colonial policies of uprooting and dividing Palestinian space into geographical areas of restricted movement, which stagnated under military rule, a regime that was enforced until 1966. Dominance over the individual contained the Palestinian within geographical areas controlled by the Israeli "security" regime in the north (the Galilee), the center (the Triangle area), and the south (the Naqab). The act of geopolitical separation was achieved through planning and engineering mechanisms of control and continuous surveillance of space, which led to the domination of Palestinian movement and the Judaization of the territory. This contraction of Palestinian space was accomplished through a plethora of legal,

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cultural, and political procedures (Yiftachel, 2006; Rouhana, 1997; Kretzmer, 1990; Yacobi, 2002).

These colonial politics, and the policies of displacement, dispersion, and violence against Palestinians, have had an impact on two levels: firstly, they sowed intense fear and confusion within Palestinian society, which reacted by redoubling its efforts to protect itself, including by safeguarding the family from displacement, poverty, hardship, and the interference of the Jewish state in its life and privacy. Systematic violence, reflected in part in the specific suffering a woman experiences upon losing her family, home, security, privacy, and access to educational institutions, etc., and the intense militarization of their bodies and lives, has obstructed the progress of women's lives (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009). The Palestinian woman is prone to become a victim following the loss of social support from her family that can result from displacement and dispersion, and the loss of her psychological, physical, and sexual security in the absence of indigenous systems of social control. The settler's geo-political and bio-political policies distanced her geographically from services, as the state has sought to "Israelize" her towns and villages and negate her social, economic, educational, and political development, obstructing her progress and stunting her growth. She lacks confidence in the state's criminal justice system when she is subjected to violence and finds official institutions reluctant to provide her with support or to criminalize violence committed against her (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011). Consistent with processes noted by feminist scholars of settler colonialism (Razack, 2002; Smith, 2005), systematic violence by the state has altered the very fabric of Palestinian society and shifted power relations within the community, including gender relations. This complex

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reality has reduced the options available to many Palestinian women, especially those facing

particular obstacles, such as the poor and those living in geographically remote areas.

Israel's settler colonialism was also reflected in spatial policies that separated Palestinian from

Jew, and in the enactment of special laws that, for example, govern land use and ownership (or

loss), impose surveillance over family reunification, and punish the mere commemoration of the

Palestinian *Nakba* (see the newly enacted Nakba Law, as well as the Israeli Citizenship Law).

Israeli policies of geographical separation, which have driven Palestinians into crowded living

spaces, together with the violent transformation of space from a Palestinian space into a space

where language, policies, and laws serve the Zionist ideology and negate the Palestinian, have

generated a new type of gender context. This violent transformation is reflected in control over

natural resources, the confiscation of land and displacement, the "Zionization" of policies (by

enacting laws that facilitate the life of the Israeli Jew while obstructing that of the Palestinian),

budgetary allocations, etc. Indeed, it is mirrored in the domination of all areas of life, from the

routing of roads and transportation systems, the Judaization of the land and space, the denial of

Palestinian requests for licenses to construct homes on their own land, the demolition of homes

and villages, the introduction of a legal framework that sustains Zionist ideology and the Jewish

nature of the state, to the strict controls placed on the Arab education system and the dictated

contents of its curricula (Abu Saad, 2004a, 2004b; Mazawi, 2004; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009).

The status of Palestinian women in the Israeli economy is reflected in the fact that most of the

women who live in abject poverty are Palestinian. According to official Israeli statistics, the

state's investment in a Jewish child's education is several times higher than its investment in the

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education of a Palestinian child (Abu-Saad, 2004a). There is a gap of close to 20 years between

Palestinian and Jewish education in Israel (in terms of budgetary allowances, availability of

classrooms, equipment, etc.), and Palestinian girls are the most adversely affected (Abu Rabia-

Queder, 2004). According to a report issued by Physicians for Human Rights in April 2009, the

Palestinian community in the Naqab has the highest mortality rate among mothers and children

during childbirth, and rates of illness among Palestinian women are the highest in the state, while

their access to health services is the lowest (Daoud, 2008). Furthermore, this feminization of

poverty renders Palestinian women vulnerable to co-optation policies, as found in the Israeli

"civil service", which offers financial support to otherized, poor and needy women, yet

camouflages the state's aim of erasing Palestinian identity, and creating additional punitive

measures against the otherized.

The impact of cultural, national and social erasure is apparent in Israel's policies of "divide and

rule," for example in the case of violence against women, where it employs Orientalist cultural

and culturalizing analyses to suggest that such violence is endemic to Arab patriarchal culture

and to avoid remarking on the context of historical and ongoing Zionist dispossessions

(Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashef, 2013). Culturalizing the analyses of violence against

women contributes to the reproduction and reconstruction of a patriarchal power to further

pressure and persecute Palestinian women, inflicting further violence, and impeding their growth

and social, political, and economic development.

Studies that have examined Palestinian women's perception of police reaction to violence

inflicted upon them suggest that the police and the Israeli judiciary system not only take an

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Orientalist approach to battered Palestinian women, but also manipulate their pain (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2004). In doing so, for example, they call or consult male relatives, abusers, or 'notables' to police stations, while claiming they are utilizing a "culturally sensitive" approach. Calling male counterparts when women are seeking police intervention was found to increase women's insecurity, and in some cases jeopardize their lives (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011). My studies showed that both the police and the criminal justice system are slow to provide women with support, thereby promoting violence against them, and empowering, reproducing, and reconstructing the prevailing patriarchal structure (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2004, 2011).

What kind of critical feminist theorizing is needed from Palestinian feminists in Israel?

In examining the status of Palestinian women in the Jewish state, and its basis in the specific context of historical, geopolitical, biopolitical and necropolitical colonial racism, we must, as Palestinian feminists, use the *Nakba* as a central event and epistemological point of departure. In order to develop a critical analysis that takes into account the suffering of the Palestinian, I believe we must explore the nature and impact of the *Nakba* and its attendant violence, which Israel used in its initial stages and continues to use. The feminist analysis I propose also calls for an examination of American, European and global support for the Zionist entity in its various stages of development. Such an examination must consider not only how this support condoned and reinforced the inhumane Zionist discourse on Palestinian suffering, but also how the ongoing denial by the international community of the justice of the Palestinian cause, by invisibilizing Palestinian suffering, reinforced the settler colonial regime and dispossession. The proposed feminist theorization also requires the exposure of the laws, bureaucracies, strategies and tactics

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used to silence and invalidate the Palestinian in the Jewish state. It should conclude by analyzing

the series of racist bills and laws that not only infringe on Palestinian public and intimate

relations, as seen in the Israeli citizenship law (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2012), but also outlaw the

mere memory of Palestinians, as found in the Nakba law (Adalah 2011). The establishment of

the Jewish state on the ruins of Palestinian homes and land through ethnic cleansing, strategies of

repression (such as the invocation of military rule until 1966), the ideological nullification of the

Palestinian entity, and its reflection in the reproduction and strengthening of Palestinian

patriarchal thought and practice, have all shaped the nature of the challenges that face Palestinian

women, and feminists.

What is meant by viewing the *Nakba* as a galvanizing event and analytical point of departure?

And how does the concept of the "physics of power" further our feminist analysis and practice?

To deconstruct the repercussions of the *Nakba* over the past 66 years—which include the

silencing of voices advocating the Right of Return, denial of the Right of Return to refugees, the

gagging of the indigenous population, the occupation of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza

Strip, and the relentless onslaught of state violence—we must first comprehend the effect of

recurrent traumas and structural injustice on the collective vision of the self and on gender roles

and policies. The perception of the Palestinian, even those individuals who are "citizens" of the

state, as a permanent security threat to Israel, which in turn requires that he/she be dominated and

"caged", has lent additional urgency to the need to find ways to empower the self and the

community, and give it space to breathe. However, settler colonial ideology and the reluctance of

the international community to extend assistance to the Palestinians has strengthened the matrix

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of colonial power and helped build the Jewish state, while at the same time increasing the burden

shouldered by Palestinians.

Trumpeting the state as a democratic one and publicly promoting the notion that the Israeli

Jewish woman enjoys absolute equality with men, while contrasting this starkly against an image

of the Palestinian woman who is relentlessly repressed by a "backward" patriarchal Palestinian

social structure, are classic strategies of colonial regimes, which deliberately set out to break the

unity and solidarity of colonized communities (Thobani, 2012; Perera and Pugliese, 2012;

Razack, 2002; Sarkar, 2009). To this end, cultural explanations were deployed to obfuscate

Israel's political injustices, while calls were made for "the salvation of the Palestinian woman

from the oppression of the Palestinian man" (see also Abu-Lughod, 2002). The status of

Palestinian women was manipulated, and they were seen and presented as emblematic of the

"backwardness" of their society. In parallel to such policies of demoralization and demonization,

the Zionist entity has demonstrated its "willingness" as a "democratic state," to provide services

to "liberate" the Palestinian woman from the oppression of the Palestinian man and patriarchy.

At the same time, it has pursued the painful processes of confiscating Palestinian land and

demolishing homes, in fulfillment of the state's plans to Judaize the territory and erase its

Palestinian identity. The smothering of the internal Palestinian economy by the state, its refusal

to grant work or building permits or provide transportation services to the Palestinians, and their

subjugation to a distinctly inferior legal reality, have all stunted the ability of Palestinian society

to develop in the present, or plan for the future.

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This logic of elimination was compounded by the obliviousness of the international community

to the suffering of the Palestinian people in its homeland, except when this suffering stems from

within the community itself, as in the case of male violence against women. On each occasion

that the Palestinian individual has attempted to resist (such as on Land Day in 1976, or in

October 2000, when Israeli police killed 13 Palestinian "citizens of the state" who stood up

against state violence), the powerful have sought to create a physics of local and global power

that excludes this Palestinian individual as a permanent "security threat" to the "democratic,

peace-seeking" state. The designation of the Palestinian as a "security threat" and someone to be

feared is a racialized fabrication employed by proponents of the colonial eliminatory ideology. It

has been used to justify the expropriation of Palestinian land, hinder the Palestinian economy,

and Judaize the Galilee and the Naqab. It has also served as a pretext for reducing and

controlling Palestinian space, imprisoning the Palestinians inside geographical cages patrolled by

the Jewish state, and establishing dominion over the physics and movement of power.

The word "physics" (derived from the Greek word, *physis)* means the knowledge or science of

matter and its motion through space and time. The "physics of power," as I present it in this

paper, refers to the study and analysis of the visible and hidden characteristics (an analysis of the

history and present) of the sources of motion, influence, and power. It should be accompanied by

an analysis of the emerging and shifting realities that shape Palestinian women's reality. Thus

the application of the term "physics of power" in Palestinian feminist analysis, as proposed in

this paper, requires the adoption of a cognitive, analytical, and empirical approach (in history,

economics, political geography, and gender) based on the day-to-day life experiences of men and

women in Palestinian society. Such an approach will enable us to gain insight into and interpret

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the Palestinian struggle through the challenges, obstacles, dilemmas, and laws that dominate

and/or influence Palestinian feminist thought and action in the Zionist state (e.g., Smith, 2007). It

also entails understanding the historical and present mode of accumulation by dispossession

(Wolfe, 2012).

Employing the concept of the physics of power can help feminists gain a thorough understanding

of the laws and the driving forces behind Palestinian feminist action at the level of daily life.

Such an understanding allows feminists to interpret occurrences in daily life within intimate

spaces like the home, family, or educational institutions, as also in the workplace and political

space. These occurrences can then be connected to the general geo-political as well as the local

public context by deconstructing and analyzing alliances built on common identities and

interests, to reveal their concentration or distribution in various forms of feminist resistance. For

example, in order to understand the low rate of Palestinian women's participation in the Israeli

labor market, we must deconstruct the structural factors that hamper or limit their employment or

opportunities to develop products, or open a company or a workplace. Similarly, to understand

the rate of unemployment among academic Palestinian women, as well as women's enrollment

in education, we must probe the factors that facilitate culturalization and orientalization, or

provide incentives for education and employment, in terms of budget allocations, the

development of disciplines that promote the entry of women into the labor market, etc. However,

we must also identify those structures that coopt and mute women's voices and block their

indigenously oriented development, including structures that deny the historic and ongoing

injustice against Palestinians. If we are to analyze the prevalence of marriage among young girls,

for instance, we should examine not only the impediments imposed by patriarchal society, but

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also the wider circumstances of the community embedded in a settler colonial structure of dispossession.

The feminist reading I propose considers the issue of the dispossession of land, the militarization of Palestinian space and time, and Israeli geo-politics and bio-politics as feminist issues of the first order. Therefore the critical discourse of Palestinian feminism that emanates from that physics requires that we adopt a genealogical strategy of deconstructing and analyzing the structures of oppression and the political work that they perform. It also requires the development of a critical theorization of the physics of power at work at various levels. Reading the map of this physics, its strategies and techniques, also demands deeper consideration if we are to gain a broader understanding of the movement of global power and of the forces that are latent and influential in matters such as the demographic control of Palestinians, occupation of land, ownership of capital, colonial and other interests, and power relations and global alliances and their impact on Palestinian men and women. This understanding must also extend to an awareness of the stage at which the community and its members resist, internalize oppression, or accept and/or deny its existence.

How can we analyze and confront the racism of the historical silence of the majority of Israeli feminists towards the historical injustice and current violence faced by Palestinian feminists?

To understand the physics of power means to understand the matrix of geopolitical and biopolitical power, in order to highlight the protection provided to the ideologies and strategies

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of domination and control deployed by the powerful. To comprehend this physics, one must first

understand its workings, and its strategies of protecting and ensuring the survival of a certain

power. Understanding this physics also entails a deep, wide-ranging understanding of the

immoral position taken by the greater part of Israeli feminist analysis, which does not address

Zionist settler colonialism prior to, during and after the *Nakba,* despite its role in violating the

rights of Palestinians in general and of Palestinian women in the Jewish state and in dispersing

their people throughout the world. On the contrary, in many cases Israeli feminists have

supported these violations, or at best remained silent about them. The majority of Israeli

feminists have produced feminist knowledge that embarks on feminist action that contemplates

Palestinian suffering only since the second occupation of 1967, i.e. the occupation of the East

Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza Strip. Some Israeli feminists did not even take this military

occupation into consideration.   For most Israeli feminists, crimes against humanity conducted

during the *Nakba* period *and afterward,* the displacement, dispossession and dispersion, and the

state's crimes against Palestinians, are simply discounted (Bar and Ajzenstadt, 2010; Radai,

2008; Bilsky, 2004; Kamir, 2004)

Constructing a feminist epistemology and praxis requires developing a new awareness of the

physics of power. It entails understanding the nature and significance of solidarity with the

dispossessed, something that global feminism, international law, and Israeli feminism have so far

failed to do. An analysis of the everydayness of gendered suffering inscribed on women's bodies

and lives challenges global justice or the absence thereof, and lifts the ever-lasting veil over

global abuses of power. It examines the role of war crimes (from the 1948 massacres in Deir

Yassin, Kafr Qassem, Tantura, and elsewhere to the siege and invasion of Gaza in 2009, and the

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continuous dispossession in the Naqab, East Jerusalem and beyond) in serving and destabilizing the physics of global and local power and exposes their impact on social structures and patriarchal power. Such an analysis, therefore, constitutes the core of my critical inquiry, as it refuses to regard Palestinian women as 'Present Absentees' in feminist analysis. Critical feminist inquiry further requires the development of an understanding of the ongoing nature of these historical abuses, in terms of the justice of the Palestinian cause and the duty and right of resistance. It also calls for the deconstruction of cultural ideologies that are marketed and sold globally at an exorbitantly high cost to Palestinians.

Israeli feminists live a life of relative ease at the expense of Palestinian suffering, which they look through without making any concrete political intervention (Thobani, 2012). They do not see (or perhaps they pretend not to notice) the repercussions of the events of the *Nakba* as a central issue for feminist action and theorizing. Their refusal to acknowledge the effects of incessant violence/oppression and the daily practices of resistance employed by the Palestinian woman, on whom the global and local (including the "feminist") physics of power has imposed itself, is immoral and, crucially, not feminist. I would argue that one can't define her/himself as a feminist while turning an entire nation, and an ongoing injustice and inhumanity, into 'Present Absentees'.

Conclusion

Palestinian feminism as set forth in this paper underlines the importance of widening the critical feminist lens to account for the physics of power, which involves understanding the geopolitical

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and economic context that has turned humans into commodities in the hands of the dominant

powers. This same context has also turned the principles of "Western and Israeli democracy"

into a commodity that is marketed for the purposes of supporting Israel's eliminatory logic and

policies. An understanding of the physics of feminist power calls for (a) the deconstruction of

feminisms that have refused to regard the *Nakba* as a focal analytical and actual source of

feminist theorization and (b) defiance in the face of global, regional, and local amnesia towards

the Palestinian right to life in the face of Israel's necropolitical regime of control, and (c) the

fight against the relegation of crimes against humanity to 'Present Absentee' status in the face of

global and settler colonial physics of power.

Understanding the physics of power, as proposed in a critical Palestinian feminist analysis,

requires an acknowledgment that the Jewish state could not have been established and can not

continue to exist as a Jewish state other than through force, sociocide, and a geopolitical,

biopolitical and necropolitical regime of dispossession. The Jewish state is not content with

what it has achieved thus far; it has not yet completed its project of militarized settler

colonialism, and its survival depends on its ability to crush all opposition. To stop such

dispossession requires building a new and viable feminist discourse and political praxis to

address the complex reality of such global and local denials.

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