

Three Mothers, Three Daughters: Palestinian Women's Stories

Michael Gorkin and Rafiqa Othman
New York: Other Press, 2000. 244 pages.

In *Three Mothers, Three Daughters: Palestinian Women's Stories*, Rafiqa Othman and Michael Gorkin present six remarkable life narratives from Palestinian women living in the Occupied Territories and Israel. By selecting three mother/daughter pairs from very different social and political circumstances, they represent, in dramatic microcosm, many elements of the twentieth-century Palestinian experience. Moreover, these stories have a stunning universal appeal, transcending their specific national context by revealing complicated issues of gender and generational relations familiar throughout the world. In this way, Gorkin and Othman have crafted an oral history that is both specific to – and transcendent of – Palestine.

From the outset of their collaboration, Gorkin and Othman wrestled with their complex personal positions and relationship, and used their preface and epilogue to frame their study in these terms. Gorkin is an American Jew living in Israel; Othman is a Palestinian Muslim from Abu Ghosh, the only Arab village on the Israeli side of the Green Line in the Jerusalem area to survive the 1948-49 war. Their collaboration was not only controversial because one is a Jew and the other an Arab, but also because being an unmarried woman, Othman confronted the issue of *'ayb* (shame) falling upon her family if society misjudged her association with her male collaborator. Moreover, several of the project's six informants would not speak with Gorkin because he is a man.

Thus, Othman juggled a difficult problem that often faces scholars conducting anthropological research within their societies: a complicated status as both an insider and an outsider. It is to her credit that she deals directly with this issue. Othman points out her position as a confidante at times, and does not hesitate to draw on a common sense of "sisterhood" to relate to women's struggles. However, as an Arab living inside Israel, her ability to understand the experiences of Palestinians living under the occupation is difficult and painful. She reminds the reader that Palestinian experiences are as diverse as any others, and that at times she is as much a political outsider as Gorkin.

The three mother/daughter pairs come from a relatively small territorial radius. However, the historical events and the borders emerging from

them have shaped these women's lives in very different ways. Part 1 features Umm Mahmud and Marianne of East Jerusalem, part 2 focuses on Umm Abdullah and Samira of the Aida refugee camp in the West Bank, and part 3 introduces Umm Khaled and Leila of Abu Ghosh. Despite their varied experiences of the Israel-Palestine conflict, they share the double bind of being part of the disenfranchised nationalist group and of being subjected to patriarchal restrictions. Thus, these life stories illustrate both the lived experience of the nationalist struggle and the gender struggle common across generational lines.

Several themes emerge from these compelling life stories. Issues of formal education (or lack thereof), the nationalist struggle, marriage, maternity, and the role of Islam in everyday life are debated by the women. Their lives have been touched deeply by the loss of Palestine, although some are more open than others about their political involvement. Samira and Umm Abdullah have been overtly affected; the former and many of her siblings have been imprisoned and tortured due to their involvement with the PLO and the first Intifada. By contrast, although Umm Khaled and Leila express disinterest in political involvement, their accounts are peppered with the trauma of clashes with the Israeli government, family separation, and the loss of property and honor due to the 1948 war. In the stories of family, motherhood, and partnership that emerge from all of the accounts, the reader walks away with a full picture of how complex everyday people's lives are. In the case of the Palestinians, these issues are bound up in the nationalist cause, which complicates matters tremendously.

One of the most potent intergenerational issues to emerge is the status of women in patriarchal Arab society. These women wrestle with the amount of control that men exert on their lives. In detailing accounts of fathers who controlled access to educational opportunities and selected marriage partners, husbands who made crucial decisions (such as how many children they would bear), and sons and brothers who continue to hold tremendous influence over them, these women also demonstrate incredible resilience. Not only are they members of a national group disenfranchised by war, but they also struggle to understand the reasons for their subordination to men. Although some see it as a natural result of God's creation while others consider it deeply rooted in historical experience, each woman is conscious of the toll that subordination has exerted on Palestinian women. In this topic, Othman's participation as an "insider" is crucial; the book is not an attack on Arab patriarchy from the outside. Instead, this issue is dealt with in terms of telling a story that is rarely told: allowing Palestinian women to discuss what

is most important in their lives. That they all chose to express opinions on this topic speaks louder than Othman's restrained commentary on it.

Three Mothers, Three Daughters is remarkable. It is an excellent source that documents the often-ignored life experiences of Palestinian women who have witnessed tremendously difficult personal and national events. It is also a fine example of how life stories introduce complex questions of identity and perspective into larger national histories. In telling their lives, these women bring up issues of nationalist struggle, war history, relations between the sexes, and intergenerational conflicts and alliances. As part of the Cultural Studies Series, this book comes with an excellent introduction by series editor Samir Dayal, a useful map pointing out the locations discussed in the book, a concise chronology of events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and a solid glossary of terms. Whether used as a text for undergraduates, an example of solid oral history, a resource for Palestinian history, or an engaging read for the general public, *Three Mothers, Three Daughters* makes a lasting impression and a timely contribution.

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The volume under review moves the rewriting a step further by attempting to take a fresh look at the Arab states' and the Palestinians' involvement in the development of the 1948 war. The editors suggest that