

Women's oppression through narrative: A Foucauldian perspective

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Foucault's theory on Panopticism posits that people who perceive that they are under surveillance act according to the values and rules set forth by the entity that is believed to be watching over them. Consequently, despite not being able to ascertain whether they are indeed being watched, such people continue to act in such manner out of fear of persecution or punishment. This theory is traditionally applied to institutions such as hospitals, prisons, schools, and workplaces. In this paper, I used Foucault's theory to analyse the values, behaviour, and action of Palestinian women and the seemingly invisible entity that encourages them to uphold gender roles, believe in their inferiority as women and the superiority of men, and perpetrate discrimination and violence against women in various aspects and means. I argue that Palestinian women are oppressed and kept under surveillance through the narratives and oral history that emerged in the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba as a form of resistance to the dominant narratives of the Zionist project.

In the past decades and even more so in recent years, there has been much interest and action towards understanding, analysing, and eliminating discrimination and violence against women. Discrimination against women is defined as:

any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field (United Nations General Assembly, 1979, p.2).

Violence against women is a broad term that refers to "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in the public or in the private life" (United Nations General Assembly, 1993, n.p). Violence against women, in its universal form, can be divided into two categories: family or intimate partner violence and community violence. Family or intimate partner violence describes violence directed at a family member that often takes place in the home, while community violence describes violence between people who are

usually unrelated and who may or may not know each other, and it generally takes place outside the home (Miller, Grabell, Thomas, Bermann, & Graham-Bermann, 2012). Gender-based discrimination and violence is rooted in the inequality between men and women.

While the global prevalence of violence against women remained constant between 2013 and 2014, the prevalence of intimate partner violence has increased from 26% in 2013 to 35% in 2014 (World Health Organization, 2014), although this increase might reflect higher reporting rates and/or improved law enforcement and data collection. It is important to understand, address, and eliminate such forms of discrimination and violence against women, but it is equally important to identify other forms of oppression of women that may not be represented in statistics or tried in courts of law. In this paper, I will discuss how women are oppressed through narratives and in the formation of oral history, with particular focus on the narratives of Palestinian women and peasantry. Although the suppression of the voice of women may not leave physical marks or wounds, such discrimination constrains their potential, influences their behaviour, values, and action, and ultimately forces their psyches to conform to the standards and restrictions set forth by the overarching oppressive force in society.

Theoretical Perspective: Foucault's Panopticism

In an analysis of the mechanisms and influences behind the changes in the French (as well as the Western) penal system, Foucault (1977) described a theory he termed Panopticism, which is based on the idea of the Panopticon as defined by Jeremy Bentham. According to Bentham (1791/1995), the Panopticon is a building or structure composed of an outer circular building divided into cells and an inner central tower. Each cell in the peripheral building has a window on the exterior wall that allows light to pass through and another on the interior wall, which corresponds to an equally spaced and evenly situated window in the central tower.

The specific design and architecture of the Panopticon allows a single watchman to see and observe all persons housed in individual cells within the structure, without the latter knowing with absolute certainty whether they are being watched or not at any specific time (Foucault, 1977). While it is impossible for a single watchman to observe all cells at the same time with equal focus, the slightest possibility that an individual is under observation at specific times forces all individuals within the structure to act as though they were being watched at all times (Foucault, 1977). Consequently, the divisions within the structure (i.e. the separated cells) imply a lateral invisibility that guarantees order as individuals are not able to plan and act against the established system. The design of the Panopticon may apply to any space of surveillance and behaviour regulation such as schools, prisons, hospitals, and workplaces. Foucault (1977) described such examples:

If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences; if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion; if they are madmen, there is no risk of their committing violence upon one another; if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time; if they are

workers, there are no disorders, no theft no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect or cause accidents. (pp. 200-201)

The primary effect of the Panopticon setting is to induce "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). In other words, the individuals in the isolated cells (i.e., the inmates) have a constant sense of being under surveillance and, as such, are forced to behave as expected all the time. Therefore, the power inherent in this setting or architectural apparatus lies in the way that the surveillance is permanent in its effect even though it is discontinuous in action. That is, while the actual act of surveillance is discontinuous and limited, the effect that the idea of surveillance has on the behaviour of the inmates is permanent and continuous.

The effectiveness of this structure as a disciplinary mechanism thus lies in one of the natural psychologies or instincts of human beings - that being watched influences behaviour, or that surveillance induces performativity (Foucault, 1977). Additionally, for this power structure to be effective at all times, it must be visible but yet unverifiable at the same time (Foucault, 1977). Visibility is assured by the mere presence of the central location where the inmate assumes the observer to be, and that presence is unverifiable in that the inmate never knows or is never completely certain whether the observer is in the aforementioned location or not.

While this theoretical perspective has been widely used to ensure surveillance of human behaviour in various settings, there are limited studies that focus on its applicability in examining oppressed minority groups. Specifically, I have drawn on the Panopticon model to deconstruct the marginalisation of Palestinian narratives and sub-narratives. Thus, there is a need to review the Palestinian narrative, which is presented in the following section.

The Birth of the Palestinian Narrative: Oral History and Theatre

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the modern world's longest and most intractable conflict (Masalha, 2009). Despite international interventions and a long-term peace process, Israelis and Palestinians have not reached a final peace agreement because of disagreements regarding borders, control of Jerusalem, Israeli settlements, and the freedom and rights of the Palestinians, among other issues (Masalha, 2009). One of the most critical events within the conflict was the Nakba –the catastrophe –in 1948, which resulted in the destruction of a greater part of Palestinian society, the driving out of approximately 90% of Palestinians in the territory occupied by the Israeli State, effectively making them, and their descendants, refugees in neighbouring countries, towns and cities (Masalha, 2009).

As Israeli forces dominated the lands formerly occupied by Palestinians and established what is now called Israel, they also dominated rights and opportunities for writing the history of the region and the Palestinian people (Yehya, 2014). In other words, Israeli narratives simply disregarded Palestinians' presence and life in the region, and denied the oppression and massacres of the Palestinians. Additionally, as streets and places were renamed to represent events and individuals in the Old Testament, and as archaeological efforts were focused on establishing a biblical history, the Zionist project effectively denied any Arab participation and historicity in the land previously occupied by Palestinians (Nassar, 2006).

In response, Palestinians began to record their oral history from their own perspectives and according to the experiences and perceptions of individuals and groups of Palestinians who experienced the Nakba and subsequent events (Yehya, 2014). By gathering testimonies, the Palestinian people would attempt to find out who was killed, how and when, with the purpose of filling in gaps in missing documentation and traditional evidence, usually presented with an apology due to the lack of other available methods for recording history (Yehya, 2014).

When the focus is cast on oral history, narratives previously obscured rise to the fore, indicating a hierarchy within Palestinian narrative itself, and uncovering sub-narratives that themselves have been marginalised. For instance, Palestinian women are one of the minority groups suppressed in the narration of history (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2008). According to Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2008), females have had to experience subordination within these narratives, especially those in minority positions.

Yehya (2014) outlines two forms of narrative hegemony that become apparent once oral history is added to the tradition. Firstly, marginalisation from the elite occurred as the cultured middle class recorded their personal histories by completing biographies and memoirs. The peasant class, in comparison, had no biographies and memoirs from the time, so none are found when one searches for the social history of a given region (Yehya, 2014). This represents a marginalisation of the peasant class in favour of the elite.

The second form of narrative hegemony is the marginalisation of the villages in favour of the towns/cities. As the Nakba has been historically framed as a crippling force to Palestinian modernity and urbanity with a focus on the role of the city and its intellectuals, the roles of farmers are marginalised to a great extent (Yehya, 2014). Oral history has uncovered alternative narratives that present the farmers as victors in the 1963 revolution, highlighting their roles in leadership and prolonging the life of the revolution. Foucault (1997) conceptualised such alternative narratives as subjugated knowledge, which can be characterised into two: historical information buried in the formal systemization, and disqualified non-conceptual knowledge.

Another form of response to the Israeli narrative –the re-writing of history to exclude any Arab oppressions, participation, and contribution to Palestinian territories –is the Palestinian theatre (Nassar, 2006). At its core, Palestinian theatre is an endeavour of political empowerment, of finding tools of expression buried deep in its history. Nassar

presents the Palestinian theatrical tradition's embrace of the Hakawati, the village storyteller:

The traditional figure now represents an authenticity of cultural forms in the theatre used to counter foreign domination and to preserve the Arab cultural heritage. Palestinian dramatists employ the figure of the storyteller not only to reflect on past events but also to stimulate the collective memory of the audience as a means of political resistance and empowerment. (p. 16).

The ultimate project of Palestinian theatre is to uncover the marginalised narratives that are buried deep in personal history due to severe cultural erosion. In this way Palestinian theatre gives life to experiences and realities long ignored or hidden. This is similar to the Theater of the Oppressed developed by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal in the early 1970s. Inspired largely by Freire's (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the Theater of the Oppressed was designed as a response to social and political problems in Brazil, specifically as a means to give voice to traditionally marginalised and silenced members of society (Boal, 2008). In the theatre of the oppressed, there is no strict division between the actors and the audience (Boal, 2008). This results in the creation of a story that is representative of the perceptions, ideas, and emotions of the collective group, and not only of the perspective of a single or few writers, producers, and directors.

The Palestinian theatre, similar to the theatre of the oppressed, serves as a counter-narrative that eliminates the prejudices and rewriting of history of dominant narratives (in this case, the Israeli narratives) and presents stories and oral histories based on the personal experiences of those people involved (i.e. those who were oppressed, marginalised, and expelled from Palestinian towns and villages). However it does so in a way that continues to uphold the Nakba narrative, placing itself firmly in opposition to Israeli hegemony first and foremost. The Palestinian theatre thus in turn creates its own meta-

narrative, a concept that was challenged by Lyotard (1979), who advocated instead for examining local narratives.

Uncovering Sublevels of Oppression: The Use of Foucault's Panoptic Lens

Oral history and theatre, as alternative forms of Palestinian documentation to traditional history, carry their own methodological burdens in being analysed. Since performativity is an essential part of giving testimony and narrating via dramatic presentation, these Palestinian narratives cannot be examined without recourse to tools for self-reference. The notion of performativity is described by Butler (2000) as the power of discourse to produce phenomena that it also regulates and constrains. Thus, it has been posited that gender is not a stable identity in which various acts proceed but rather an identity constituted in a particular time. As such, Butler (2000) argues that that gender has to be understood as the mundane way in which behaviour of various kinds is just the illusion of an abiding gendered individual.

This argument invites questions on how to account for the effect of the external gaze on Palestinian narratives' power of representation, and the effects of a constant, roving force of separation and surveillance (i.e., the Israeli state). For this, Foucault's panoptic lens serves a crucial purpose. From the seminal notion that being watched influences behaviour, and that surveillance induces performativity, comes a design where the mechanism of surveillance is completely hidden from view—and may not in fact exist—but nonetheless induces performativity through its very concept. This 19th Century conception by Bentham is still so relevant as to be capable of illuminating the function and prevalence of panoptic devices in modern society, from video cameras in stores to government surveillances of our behaviour. This model also serves to help deconstruct the marginalisation of Palestinian narratives. Gaza has not been termed the world's largest open-air prison for nothing. As with everything else under occupation, Palestinian forms of cultural expression must still

perform compliance to the demands and requirements of the Israeli regime and its surveillance apparatus. While surveillance induces performativity, and by proxy burying, hiding, suppressing, it also—as the Nakba narrative itself will bear testament to—inspires resistance, the creation of coded, hidden, or obscure spaces or modes of expression to escape the influence of hegemonic power.

Unfortunately, in the case of Palestinian narratives, in the process of resisting one model of power, another Panopticon is raised, leading to the suppression of Palestinian sub-narratives in the process of bolstering and nurturing the urgent Nakba narrative. Its own performativity hides this well. Just as the Israeli narrative must bury its crimes to bolster its claim to legitimacy, the Nakba narrative must not admit to usurping the legacy of its women and peasants to uphold its own. If narratives are about constructing history, the clash of dominant Israeli and Palestinian narratives end up coinciding to construct a history that ultimately marginalises the buried sub-histories of Palestine. Just like nested Russian dolls, the nature of Palestinian narratives is all hidden beneath the surface, except for some of the obvious signs that are not invisible to the outward eye. Specifically, as Butler (2000) noted, gender is seen in a different perspective in the context of Palestinian narratives.

The Oppression of the Voice of Palestinian Women

As the Palestinian narrative was essentially forwarded as a counter-narrative to the Zionist or Israeli narrative, it presented the life of the Palestinians before the Nakba as being very peaceful and characterised by mutual respect and agreement (Yehya, 2014). The narratives also served to incite feelings of nostalgia by describing in detail specific everyday practices and traditions, especially those that create an ideal image of Palestinian life pre-Nakba (Yehya, 2014). A similar trend was observed by Nassar (2006) in the Palestinian Theatre. As the focus of theatre narratives and presentation, the Hakawati is able to strengthen the collective identity of

the spectators during the performance (Nassar, 2006). Consequently, as the spectators are often male or belonging to higher classes, the lives, perspectives, and difficulties that were faced by women pre-Nakba often go unrecognised and unrepresented in theatre narratives of Palestinian life (Nassar, 2006).

In other words, while Palestinian oral history and theatre appeared to present a unified image and story of Palestinian life before the Nakba, beneath the surface lay another form of suppression—a deep suppression of the voices of a large part of Palestinian history (i.e., women's voices). Specifically, Yehya (2014) noted how oral history narratives or the Palestinian theatre fail to recognise the oppression suffered by women and peasant families under usurping Palestinian families. In the course of collecting testimony from women, Yehya (2014) learned of how women in peasant families were marginalised by larger Palestinian families before the occurrence of Nakba.

Specifically, one woman testified that her family, which used to live on a modest piece of land, was constantly threatened by a larger family (Yehya, 2014). Additionally, this woman testified that such large Palestinian families used to seize women, money, and large tracts of land from peasant Palestinian families to assert their power and reach over such small families (Yehya, 2014). It was also revealed that women were not allowed to inherit land from their ancestors before the day of Nakba. The peasant woman also testified that after the Nakba, the youth from peasant families become more educated and open-minded, which subsequently led to the rise of a class of doctors and lawyers (Yehya, 2014).

On the other hand, Yehya (2014) also found that women from the larger Palestinian families who remained in the lands they owned even after Nakba were said to have regretted not having their children likewise educated. Essentially, larger Palestinian families that used to constantly threaten and seize the women and property of smaller families had in turn lost their own

children and, subsequently, their property. From the perspective of this Palestinian woman and many others, especially those from the lower classes, the Nakba can be viewed as an event that allowed them to realise a specific form of justice in destroying power-privileged structures of usurping families over peasants (Yehya, 2014).

Differences between the dominant Palestinian narratives and the narratives of such peasant women can be explained by inspecting and analysing the origins of the stories. A cursory look at any oral history study would show that the majority of testimonies in the Nakba narratives come from men (Yehya, 2014). Butler (2000) theorizes that in the context of Palestinian narratives of their history, women are devalued. Moreover, in the collection of narratives for studies on the experiences of the Palestinian people, women and those belonging to the lower peasant classes were usually relegated to the back while men, especially those from large and prominent families, were asked to relate their stories (Yehya, 2014).

In case the erasure of the experiences of an entire class and entire gender is difficult to fathom, Foucault's (1977) panopticism helps us understand how a pervasive phenomenon could be so hidden and continue to remain so. If one views the Palestinian peasantry through a panoptic lens, one can see women's silence and submission as self-regulated—that they are effectively controlled to participate in their own erasure.

Samira Haj (1992) explained in detail the mechanics of these gender roles. Initially, a combination of sex-segregated social structures was established. Specifically, gender identity is shaped through the female life cycle, with great value placed on motherhood, and a hierarchy of subordination where young brides submit to all men and senior women. Moreover, women only gain seniority over other women through male proxy. Furthermore, by bearing sons, their only power comes late in life when their sons marry and they finally inherit influence and power over the new bride in the household (Haj, 1992). In a cross-generational cycle of

efficient self-regulation, women must uphold the very hierarchy that disadvantages them in order to possibly raise themselves to a higher status, thereby perpetuating the cycle. Much like how the inmates of the Panopticon need to adhere to their expected roles in order to maintain their own wellbeing and safety, Palestinian women must embrace their roles as mothers for survival and the future prospect of power (Haj, 1992). It is difficult to dissent to the patriarchal patrilineal family structure when it is also the only source of power, protection, and dignity—a woman outside of it has no categorisation, place, nor claim. In a sense, the very segregation and disbursement of roles is a cloak that both brands and protects (Haj, 1992). These findings aligned with what Yehya (2014) found. Haj found that Palestinian women have no choice but to embrace their roles as mothers to survive. Similarly, Yehya found that Palestinian peasant women pre-Nakba had to act in accordance with a patrilineal patriarchal family structure where female sexuality is a commodity and women are bartered like goods at the demand of male family or community members and land-owners.

Nusair (2010), in the fourth chapter of "Displaced at Home: Ethnicity and Gender among Palestinians in Israel," analysed the perceptions and narratives of three generations of Palestinian women living in Israel. She evaluated who has the right to narrate the past and found that the majority of the women, regardless of their generations, understand and identify themselves at their present socio-political reality through the past. Most women, regardless of their generations as well, associated gendered power relations in the family and community to their experiences of the imposition of the Israeli State in Palestinian lives and livelihood (Nusair, 2010). All the participants shared that the third generation women have the most freedom when it comes to pursuing their education and career. The third generation woman also has more access to the public space in general. The analysis led to the affirmation that gender roles among

Palestinian women are spatially and politically constructed. Women's identities and boundaries are all affected by the constraints and opportunities present and afforded by a given locality (Nusair, 2010).

Another important literature that highlighted the oppression felt by Palestinian women from the voices of the women themselves is Fatma Kassem's "Palestinian Women." Kassem wrote the book based on the oral testimonies of 20 ordinary but urban Palestinian women residing in Lyd and Ramleh. These women witnessed the critical events in 1948 that led to the formation of the State of Israel. They were also among those women who remained after the war. According to the author, her book depicts the life stories of women and provides a way to correct women's "ongoing exclusion from historical documents and collective memory" (p. 5).

Kassem started her book by first situating herself. She described herself as a Palestinian woman who was raised in Israel. She shared that her family, her upbringing and early life experiences had all affected her views as a Palestinian and as a woman. Kassem mostly found out about Palestinian history and the 1948 events from her father's storytelling while she was a child. Her father instilled in her stories about courageous Palestinian people. However, as she relayed how her father influenced her views and understanding of Palestinian history, Kassem wrote that she can see how her mother never participated in the discussions, as if her mother's experiences and views did not matter. Kassem argued that her mother's silence was the result of a patriarchal society wherein Palestinian women are considered absent from official Palestinian history. In addition, Palestinian women are also silenced by virtue of them being Palestinians living in Israel. Israel bars Palestinians from narrating or discussing Palestinian history in public arenas. Conversely, while Palestinian men have the ability share their stories in intimate spaces, women cannot do so at all, whether publicly or privately at home. Kassem's work was designed to "create equal spaces for [the] silenced voices not as complementary to

men's stories, but as worthwhile and deserving of visibility in their own right" (p. 39).

In her quest to find out the stories of these 20 women, Kassem observed several things. The participating women themselves were shocked that someone was interested in their stories and not those of their husbands or sons. They were even more shocked that someone wanted to not only hear them out but actually document what they were going to share. Regardless of their surprise, the 20 women were grateful to be afforded a chance to share their version of Palestinian history. In their narratives, the women disclosed how they dealt with daily routine and how they re-established the family life after the 1948 events. Getting their stories was not easy, because some women were reluctant to speak at first. Some were worried about how speaking up could affect their children's places in the Israeli society. When they spoke, some were accompanied by their children. Unmarried women were more enthusiastic about the project than the married women. Because only four out of the 20 women experienced formal schooling, oral data collection was the best method to use.

Kassem (2011) observed that as the women narrated their experiences, their language conveyed both oppression and resistance. She observed that women objected to the delegitimation of their version of Palestinian history and at the same time, resisted the idea that they did not contribute to Palestinian national history or were essentially absent. Their use of certain terms was also very telling of their oppressive experiences. The 20 women mostly utilized sexual metaphors to explain the invasion of the Israelis into their land such as 'entered', 'came in' and 'took us.' Kassem noted that these are common terms used to describe sexual penetration of a woman by a man. With the use of these words, Kassem concluded that women were unprepared for the 1948 events, where Israelis forcefully invaded their homes and land.

Kassem (2011) also found that the theme of home did not mean the same for all the women. Home has different meanings in the Palestinian context and is associated with both personal and collective meanings. Home for the women who narrated their accounts of the 1948 events can be categorized into three meanings: a social organizer, a target for attack, and a burial site. Home according to the women is also commonly viewed as a place to tell forbidden stories. This is the view they hold up to this day. Kassem's work showed that even though more than six decades have passed since the 1948 events, Palestinian women can still remember them like they happened yesterday because the memories were so strong that they have been repeated many times in their minds since they happened and within their families.

All these studies lead to the conclusion that when something happens to a society to disrupt it, women suffer the brunt of the effects but are forced to be silent about their feelings and thoughts. When they will be given the opportunity to narrate these historic and monumental eras of their lives, their accounts of history will always be different to that of the men and are therefore important to be heard.

Conclusion

The past several years have seen an increase in active work towards the recognition of the problem of violence against women and its subsequent eradication. While improvements in how women are treated can be seen across the globe, there remain subtle mechanisms through which women are violated, abused, and oppressed. In this paper, I have discussed how Palestinian refugees created and promoted their own narratives through oral history and Palestinian theatre. As historical accounts by Israelis made Palestinians appear irrelevant in their narratives, Palestinians created and propagated their own narratives to let people know of their stories, their lives before the start of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and their continuous oppression since then. However, further analysis showed that even the Palestinian narratives –both in oral history and theatre –also served as tools of

oppression. Specifically, further inquiry showed that Palestinian narratives often only represented the stories and perspectives of men, especially those from larger, influential, and high-class families, and that the stories and perspectives of women were often redacted or unheard. This analysis also showed that while male Palestinians drew a picturesque image of life before the Nakba, Palestinian peasant women would indicate that the Nakba at least allowed them and their children to earn an education and to have the opportunity to become professionals.

This account of the suppression and subversion of women's voice in Palestinian narrative leads to two important realisations. First is that violence and discrimination against women are not always personal (i.e. inflicted on a single woman at a point in time), but can be applicable to an entire class or community of women; that violence against women is not always physical or psychological, but can be subtle and inflicted as a lack of right and privilege; and that such subtle violence against women can be so ingrained in a specific culture that it is hardly recognised as such. Second, when viewed through the lens of Foucault's panopticism theory, violence against women can take the form of an ominous entity that constantly watches and surveys each individual's movement, or at least creates the impression of such continual surveillance. This causes men to continue traditional behaviours and actions that undermine and oppress women in various aspects, and consequently causes women to accept such discrimination and inferiority. With the Panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1977), behaviours can be controlled through bodies of knowledge instilled among the people. Palestinian narratives have been controlled by their unfolding history. Thus, the oppression among women has continued until the present time.

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