Captive Revolution

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Palestinian Women's Anti-Colonial Struggle Within the Israeli Prison System

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Introduction

This book aims at making audible the hidden voices, stories and histories of women political detainees while simultaneously raising international awareness of the plight of over 5,000 Palestinian political prisoners who currently suffer torture and inhumane treatment in Israeli prisons. The significance of the issue of women political prisoners is rather clear, as it occupies a central position in current international – and especially US – politics. There is little doubt that the insistence of the United States on pushing the current Israeli–Palestinian 'peace negotiations', in which the issue of political prisoners is placed at the centre of the talks, is a result of the failure of this imperialist power to bring about any stability in the Middle East. The stories and documentaries produced on the systematic torture, sexual mutilation, rape and atrocities committed against women (and men) in the US controlled prison of Abu Ghraib has drawn international public attention to the question of political detainees, especially in the case of women.

The absence of academic and especially feminist institutional interest in the lives and experiences of women's anti-colonial armed struggle casts a question mark around the so-called progressive leanings of such institutions. Concerning Palestinian women's political struggle in Israel/Palestine, for example, an excess of feminist literature has been produced worldwide about women's involvement in the First Intifada (1987–92), and a plethora of Israeli Zionist and overwhelming orientalist writings were produced about Palestinian women freedom fighters and armed resisters after the Second Intifada (2000–03), yet hardly any literature analysing or accounting for the experiences of women's armed resistance historically, especially during the period of 1960–80 exists. All what existed then and continues until this day is an Orientalist depiction of Palestinian women as uneducated, anti-democratic and over-oppressed by their own culture and religion.

The significance of this study goes beyond a corrective mission; additionally, it voices what has been silenced or rendered invisible. This study is also concerned with demonstrating the difference between the status and role of Palestinian women (often lumped together as Muslims, Arabs and even terrorists in the Western imagination) and

the latter's real lived experiences. This study also makes visible women's roles in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, especially among Third World peoples (both in the West in the Diaspora and in the Third World itself) which have hardly, if ever, attracted the attention of institutionalized feminism.

The question of positionality, identity or location occupies an important space in the making of feminist methodology, particularly when research involves epistemological production and especially the type of knowledge which is based on women's lived experiences. Dorothy Smith's 'institutional ethnography' (2005), which theorized an epistemology for understanding women's everyday experiences has contributed to feminist methodology. This was the starting point in conceiving the current project: uncovering the invisibility of Palestinian women freedom fighters, especially those militant fighters in the anti-colonial national liberation movement. The period in discussion here is the 1960s through the 1980s, a historical phase which included a high level of women's militant resistance throughout the globe. On a personal level, this research also was 'the season' for sharing my personal experiences as an ex-political detainee, the fate which most political activists – militant and not militant – face.

Sharing or reflecting on my detention experience during the discussions with women political detainees played an important role in eliciting the sharing of information and knowledge among all participants; it also facilitated the conversations by removing what otherwise would have been seen as power relations between the 'researcher' and the 'researched'. The sensitivity of some of the discussions, especially stories related to sexual torture, require equally sensitive approaches to release deep and valued personal information. This methodological point does not suggest that women without the experience of political detention cannot understand or write about other women political detainees. The work, for example, of Barbara Harlow (1992; 1994; 1996) is very important here. When the research involves personal discussions with women ex-militant detainees, as is the case in this project, sharing one's experiences (especially that of the researcher), I argue, can play an important role in facilitating lively discussions and the overcoming of certain taboos with a certain degree of ease. More importantly, the researcher's sharing of experiences of political activism with women in discussions presents a form of validation of political activism. In such research, the gap between the Academy and activism narrows. Further explanation of the methodology used in this research is presented later in this chapter.

For many decades the voices of most women involved in anti-colonial resistance movements, including political detainees, have largely been lost in the official histories and stories of nation building and national struggles. This project aims to restore some of the silenced and otherwise invisible voices and therefore histories of women militant fighters turned political detainees by reintegrating them into their proper 'public' space as participants, agents, and makers of their history.

Chapter 1 reaffirms the international character of women militant fighters and their experiences as fighters both outside prison in the society and inside prisons as political detainees. It does this by recounting the experiences of women from various parts of the world, including the United States, Northern Ireland, Algeria and elsewhere. While attempting to make visible the voices and experiences of such women, Chapter 1 also establishes the strong relationship between, on the one hand, colonialism and imperialism as forms of oppression and, on the other, women's resistance to these forms, arguing that the phenomenon of women political detainees is as old as the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist liberation struggles. At least since the 1960s, militant anti-colonial fighters including women have filled prisons and detention camps in many parts of the world. Women's active participation in resistance movements including the armed struggle has left and continues to leave its marks on our human history.

One common theme in all states, colonial, settler colonial, imperialist and so on, is the presence of people, including women, who challenge, defy and resist the state. While recognizing the historical specificity of each country and each struggle, Chapter 1 focuses on some of the shared and common experiences of women political detainees in various parts of the world, for example, Moroccan, Algerian, Lebanese women and women from Northern Ireland. Chapter 1 also demonstrates the shared character of all such states: the criminalization of political resistance and the use of sexuality and women's bodies as an instrument of torture. It argues that the state (and its prison authorities) uses women's bodies as a site of victimization and a tool of control; it also demonstrates how women use the same tool, that is, their own bodies, as a tool to challenge and resist their victimization by prison authorities. These topics are discussed in further detail later in the book.

Revolutions, anti-colonial struggles, and national liberation movements often evolve in a particular environment in which the articulation of the social, the economic, the political, and the ideological takes place in the

context of the local, the regional, and the international. For example, the 'Palestinian Question', to use Edward Said's notion (1980), the so-called Israeli–Palestinian conflict, has been at the heart of the regional and international arena since at least 1948 and the creation of the state of Israel, and this 'conflict' has been fought at the social, economic, political, and ideological levels throughout all those years. The centrality of Israel for US (and European) imperialist interests, many argue, is detrimental not only for the maintenance and expansion of capitalism, but also for the overall hegemony of the United States over the Arab Middle East and its rich resources (see, for example, Chomsky 1999, 2011; Said 1980; Mooers 2006a).

It should come as no surprise, Chapter 2 argues, that such policies (e.g. those serving US imperialism) continue until this day to be imposed upon the Arab world, the most recent examples being the US intervention in the countries of the so-called 'Arab Spring' (i.e. Egypt, Tunisia and Libya), with attempts to hijacking the people's revolt and aiding Muslim Brotherhood to gain control.

Chapter 2 establishes a strong link between Israel–Palestine (and especially the Palestinian struggle) and the global forces of imperialism and colonialism and their racist Orientalist ideology. This ideology and its widespread circulation in the West including Israel have been central to how the Palestinian struggle is perceived. It is this ideology that constructs a new epistemology for perceiving the Middle Eastern people, the Muslim, the Arab and specially the Palestinian. This chapter challenges the hegemonic Orientalist perspective that depicts peoples' resistance as terror while justifies state terrorism as a means for spreading 'Western values of democracy'. In doing so, it re-examines the definition of 'violence' and differentiates between the violence of the state and the violence of the anti-colonial resistance.

The ideology of imperialism expressed partly in the Orientalist perspective of Arab including Palestinian women, Chapter 2 argues, is not the trait of the official institutions of the state alone. This perception is also hegemonic in the Academy and especially among what I refer to as Orientalist feminists and imperialist feminists. In her study of Western feminist writings about Algerian women, Marnia Lazreg (1988) highlighted the collusion between feminism and the colonial (and the imperialist) state in speaking about women of the colonies. Examples provided include the Orientalist hegemonic discourse on Palestinian women's resistance that describes them as terrorists, as uneducated, as fallen women, and so

on. Orientalism, this chapter also argues, constitutes an important part in the criminalization and dehumanization of women militant fighters at the hand of the colonial state and its prison authorities. Chapter 2 also provides a critique of the Orientalist discourse, emphasizing its ahistorical approach and demonstrating its ideological stand against resistance and anti-colonial struggles. The chapter develops the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist feminist approach adopted throughout this book. It does so partly by drawing on the works of Fanon (1970), Jenkin (1987), Harlow (1986a, 1992, 1996) and Mooers (2006a), among others. This approach is also used in challenging imperialism and Orientalism including the notions of 'democracy', 'individual rights' and 'human rights', concepts used to camouflage atrocities committed by the state while it expands the imperial interests.

One important force in driving women in general and Palestinian women more specifically into joining the anti-colonial resistance struggle while knowing full well the risks of such involvement is the influence of the culture of resistance within which women find themselves. Resistance culture, Chapter 3 argues, provides a rich base from which female (and male) fighters draw upon in their anti-colonial struggle. Resistance culture is produced not only locally/nationally but also regionally and internationally. This was particularly so during the period of the book's focus (from the 1960s through the 1980s). Drawing on examples from various world revolutionary moments, this chapter established the importance of this culture in, for example, translating a political poem from its written abstract state into an empirical reality. Special emphasis in Chapter 3 is placed on the very rich national (Palestinian) culture of resistance, produced at that time in the forms of poetry and novels.

Palestine, Barbara Harlow argues (1992, 1994, 1996), was pioneering in producing an impressive body of resistance culture, especially *adab al-muqawama* (resistance literature) and *adab al-sujoun* (prison literature). These forms of cultural resistance, Chapter 3 demonstrates, formed a central building block in *fikr al-muqawama* (resistance thought) among Palestinian freedom fighters, including female ones. The heavy price paid by most cultural producers at the time (ranging from imprisonment and assassination) was acknowledged and honoured by women involved in the militant struggle.

Historically, one major dilemma in the history of the Academy has and continues to be the apparent gap between those who make history and those who write history. Activism and the Academy often collude, not only

in the hard sciences but in the social sciences as well. This is true in our case study; thus, whereas Palestinian women were involved in the making of their/our history, the nation's history, until at least the last decade or so, has been written by men. This has undoubtedly led to the seeming invisibility of Palestinian women involved in the anti-colonial and national struggle. Women's invisible role in the making of their history, Chapter 3 argues, is not peculiarly Palestinian. In fact, it is also global: most resistance literature, historically, has been expressed in the male language, where the nation is depicted as gender neutral as if women do not matter.

Chapter 4 shifts from the general to the specific, detailing the individual experiences of political detainees. It highlights the voices and experiences of Palestinian women ex-political detainees. This chapter provides a strong rebuttal of the Orientalist feminist perception of Palestinian women involved in the armed struggle … their images as uneducated, as fallen women, or as women 'who dishonoured their families' and thus joined the armed struggle to cleanse their families' names. Conversations with the women reveal the healthy relationship they all had with their families and for some the especially close relationships they had with their brothers and fathers before being involved in the armed struggle. In fact, in many cases it was such healthy family experiences which provided a smooth environment for their involvement in the resistance. This chapter demonstrates that it was the history of the family (especially relationships with parents) during the Nakba or other tragedies caused by Israel that pushed these women into the armed struggle. The chapter also reveals the importance of education for most of these women, a sizeable number of whom had already acquired university degrees before joining the struggle. In addition to responding to the question of why these women joined the armed resistance, Chapter 4 details the unreported violence exercised by the prison authority against these women from the moment of their arrest to the gruelling interrogation, which is mostly based on forms of torture to the humiliation and intimidation practised against them throughout their years of detention. The prison as a state institution, this chapter argues, has developed particularly gendered or sexual methods it uses to torture women, methods focusing on their bodies and psychological states.

Kumari Jayawardena's seminal work *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986), which establishes a strong relationship between women's participation in national liberation movements and their feminist awareness, is only partially correct, as Chapter 5 demonstrates.

The difference established between gender consciousness and feminist consciousness argued by Julie Peteet (1991) seems more applicable to Palestinian women freedom fighters turned political detainees. Chapter 5 demonstrates that most women involved in the military resistance voiced their belief in gender equality: they interpreted the carrying of arms as an expression of gender equality, and they did not see themselves oppressed within their families. As Chapter 5 demonstrates, the rise of feminist consciousness among women political detainees has followed different paths and has not been a necessary result of their struggle in the national liberation movement. Considering that the western hegemonic feminist movement at the time was expressed in liberal and radical forms, it is no surprise that most first-generation women detainees did not see itself as part of this movement. These women have clearly prioritized the national cause over the feminist. As Chapter 5 shows, the second generation women detainees in our discussion were more comfortable expressing feminist beliefs and identifying with feminism.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides very rich material concerning methods of resistance that women invented while in prison. Thus, along with various forms of resistance such as work stoppages, hunger-strikes, and refusing to obey orders, women used their innovative and creative skills, turning the prison into an Academy where they learnt and taught others many subjects and facilitated the completion of high school by young detainees; they also initiated gender and political consciousness-raising sessions, discussing world topics and social-gender relations. This process, as many admit, has undoubtedly contributed to their personal, social, and political development. Finally, this chapter makes the point that women's struggle which began before their incarceration and continued throughout their detention time was not over. These women continued the struggle even after their release, but this time in order to continue living as productive members of their society (e.g. finding a job, achieving social recognition and finding the proper partner).

Reflections on Methodology and Research Methods

To begin with, the field data collected for this project involved one-on-one conversations with 17 female political ex-detainees and a one-day focus group with 14 women participants, the majority drawn from participants previously interviewed but also including others who had not. Data

collection also included archival work (covering newspapers, magazines, and records kept at various women's organizations, particularly those of Ina'ash al-Usra, the organization which kept records on all women political prisoners, especially during the 1960s through the 1980s, and which celebrated the release of each prisoner). All private conversations as well as the day-long focus group discussions were tape recorded. Investigating and analysing workers' conditions, does not necessarily require one to be a member of the working class, nor does researching conditions of the 'natives' obligate one to be an aboriginal, as Fanon's extensive research on the Algerian revolution reveals (Fanon 1970). Doing research with female political detainees is not different: you do not have to have experienced detention and prison torture in order to study and analyse women's experiences in political detention. However, it is important to note that experiencing political detention and all of its ordeals and forms of resistance and sharing such experiences with the women during conversations – such as the case of the current author – has proven useful in that it made women much less reluctant to divulge their experiences with confidence.

Sharing my own political detention experience with the women has undoubtedly facilitated more open, smooth and participatory discussions. While I surely learned much more from the women's rich and long experiences than they did from my relatively short and pale experience, the moments shared reduced and even eliminated the sense of tension that often occurs in research on sensitive issues such as political detention and the ordeals related to it. Going into the field having a history and experiences similar to the women in conversations undoubtedly reduces if not eliminates the power relations between the researcher and the women who are the subject of this study. This was true during the face-to-face conversations conducted with the women and the more so during the focus group. Conversations in both forms of data collection lose their detached character, turning instead into an intimate discussion with friends.

Familiarity with the culture and language of the women one works with is an important constituent in research methods. Equally if not more important is a researcher's knowledge of the history, especially the political and cultural history, which is the crucible of women detainees' experience. Even with the presence of all these factors, a judgement has to be made on the exact terminology the researcher needs to use when arranging and publishing the results of the research. For example, one of the issues raised during my conversations with the women ex-political detainees was the

precise terminology to be used in labelling them, that is, whether they were political prisoners or political detainees, and in addition whether the places in which they were incarcerated should be called prisons or detention camps. Politically, differentiating between the terms political detention and political prisons becomes important (and also in terms of how one sees and defines oneself). Susan Rosenberg's discussion of these two terms, described in the first chapter or in the following chapter, is pertinent here. The term political prisoner that Rosenberg uses to identify a person's struggle and resistance against her or his state is applicable to Palestinian citizens of the state of Israel. This term, she argues, 'complies with international legal definitions of political detainees' (Rosenberg 2006: 1). On the other hand, as will be discussed in the next chapter, people 'who are in pursuit of the recognition of their national liberation struggles for self-determination, are defined as political detainees' (Rosenberg 2006: 2). This definition resonates well within the context of women's struggle in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) against Israeli settler colonialism. In recognition of the fact that every woman interviewed considered herself a political detainee, the latter term will be used throughout this book as a manifestation of the identity of the overwhelming majority of Palestinian political prisoners, who until recently numbered over 10,000 people.

First and foremost, appreciating the sensitivity and delicacy of the topic of this research, I was exceptionally concerned with the security of the women involved. At the outset of the one-on-one interviews as well as during the focus group discussions, my intention to use pseudonyms in publication was made clear. To my great surprise, however, I learned that none of the women in the study were as concerned with the issue of security and anonymity as I was; they all said that I could use their real names and that they were not afraid of the Israelis. This response might be explained by the fact that, for most of these women, a relatively long time has passed since their release, and that the torture and humiliation they faced under Israeli occupation and especially as political prisoners was too pronounced to try to hide it from the public. In other words, nothing could happen to them worse than what they have experienced and continue to experience, hence the lack of concern in revealing their identities. In addition, a number of the Palestinian women political detainees have already voiced their experiences publicly, have given interviews to filmmakers, or have published their experiences, as is the case with Aisha Odeh who, by the time of my research between 2007 and 2009, had already published two books (Odeh 2004, 2007) narrating her experiences. This is

also true of Ittaf Alian, who published her experience (Alian 2011), of Itaf who revealed part of her experience through an interview on Al-Jazeera (Al-Jazeera 2006), and Rasmiyya Odeh whose story was reported in the British *Sunday Times* Report on 19 June 1977, as well as in the account by Soraya Antonius (1980).

Another issue which will be discussed in more detail later in the book needs to be mentioned here: the issue of insider/outsider in research methodologies. The substance of the debate here includes the native researcher who lives the experience of her society but might not necessarily be familiar with the debates going on outside of her country, especially in the West. There is another aspect to this debate which is of particular relevance to this book, namely the issues relating to exilic researchers and those who live in the diaspora but who do their research on their own community. This category of researchers and to which the author belongs, as will be seen shortly, has the potential of further enriching the research and the data gathered. After all, the one significant question in research is not who can speak for or represent a group, rather how that group, especially a marginalized one, is being presented.

This issue concerns the position and politics of the researcher herself; it is about where she stands on the issues of discussion. Equally important, if not more so, the issue here is about the researcher's familiarity with the culture and history of the women she is conversing with or interviewing, which creates a situation of familiarity between the interviewer and those interviewed. This is particularly so if the researcher, as in our case, has also undergone a similar experience as the other women. Despite the ease with which I found myself while conducting interview conversations with the women political detainees, a number of culturally specific issues arose. For example, the use of certain terms in a public setting was a contentious issue. The use of a number of sexual terms in Arabic are tabooed and normatively women should refrain from using them in public. These include terms like *sharmouta* or *manuouka* (whore) or *qahba* (prostitute or whore). Such slurs were frequently used by the interrogators against every female political detainee interviewed. This issue created a dilemma for most of us during both the face-to-face conversation as well as during the focus group. Some of the women who used these terms defended their use, saying that this was necessary for telling their story accurately, while others refrained from using the terms, referring to them through circumlocutions such as 'You know! These bad names', 'I cannot say these words', and so on.