



Women, Literature, and Oral History

By Faiha Abdulhadi



Literature and poetry have accompanied and enriched my life since I was very young. I learned by heart a good amount of poetry, verses that I used to recite with love, inspired by my parents who transmitted to me their love of Arabic language, poetry, and all forms of literature. Poetry created a space of freedom, a place where I could breathe, and opened windows for my soul that could not be unlocked by the social ambience of my city, Nablus. We cherished our gatherings with our family friend, the poet Fadwa Touqan, listening with passion to her lovely poetry. The highlight of my life was when someone asked me to recite some of her poems.

Family photo. Faiha with father, mother, brothers, sister, husband, sons, and daughter.



Family photo: Qasem Abdulhadi (father) with (from the left) Faiha, Sa'd, Faisal, and Fadla, 1957.

Literature was my main interest during most of my studies. It seemed to me that there was a great difference between human history and written history. I never enjoyed memorizing abstract facts in order to acquire good grades, a propensity that made me escape from the humanities to natural sciences. But this choice was not due to my preference for science courses; it was rather an attempt to escape the rigid teaching style of the courses in humanities that required strict memorization, which was common at the time.

Literature has accompanied me all my life. It was my savior and companion in difficult circumstances at school, in prison, at the university, and throughout my life. For my prison mates and me, the books that we used to borrow from the prison library were our best companions. Poetry, especially when it was musically composed, played a major role in our experience of solidarity, our exchange of secret messages, and our steadfastness in enduring interrogation and torture. I wrote my first published poetry in prison; I sent it to Ghassan Kanafani who published it in the literary section of *Al-Hadaf* magazine.

At the university, a few lines of poetry written on a piece of paper saved

me from having to join the Faculty of Commerce, as my grades weren't high enough to join the Faculty of Arts and Literature. I had spent a good time in prison before sitting for the high school exams.

I was thrilled when, for the first time, I was introduced to social history viewed from the perspective of women. Its methodology of rewriting history by taking into account the perspective of women reminded me of literary criticism that uses a similar approach when indirectly setting the stage for social and political change by shaking prevailing ideas and challenging preset models. The deeper I immerse myself in the theory and practice of oral history, the more I feel I am stepping into the vastness of human experience, a world that is full of both complications and fertility. In fact, social history provides a lush base and forms an indispensable source of reference for literary works since it contains stories, narrations, songs, ballads, folk stories, proverbs, axioms, paintings, and folk dancing with related songs and music. All these forms of expression flow deeply into the human soul to reemerge mixed with its innate depth.

Social history viewed from the perspective of women correlates the perspective and needs of the individual

The practice of oral history contains a feminist element as it allows women to speak for themselves and to practice their right of expression, thus teaching them to trust their own powers.

with the wider perspective and needs of the people and the nation and thus helps in understanding the areas of strength in both spheres. Feminist practice of oral history takes care to record the details, to grasp the feelings of others, rather than just record an event. This perspective depends on observation, on listening, and on sharing with others. In addition, it concentrates on attending to the minute details, records the hidden voice of women, and redefines terminologies used by women in an

attempt to gain a deeper reading of their ideas and feelings.

Literature from the perspective of women esteems women's voices and raises them up high. It unveils the works of unknown women writers whose treasures have been buried or ignored. Here it coincides with oral history; however, it differs in the use of language: oral history commits to the spoken language, whereas literature rewrites events in its own artistic language.

I believe in the power of writers who have the genuine talent to employ humanity in their writings, especially when they are deeply involved in politics, without having political slogans overtake their literature. I consider Ghassan Kanafani to be the best model of how to both correlate and detach literature and politics.

However, the subject of women has been at the forefront of all my writings as I have explored their role in history,

literature, poetry, and in life in general. In *Types of Heroines in the Palestinian Contemporary Novel*, I have outlined four such types: in the first, the woman is the active partner; in the second, the woman is the follower and supporter; in the third, the focus is on the woman and her body; and in the fourth type, the woman shows wisdom and serves as a role model.

As I studied the stories of Palestinian heroism that have been transmitted in our culture, I found that most of them discuss the man/hero, with little reference to the woman/hero. The heroism I was looking to explore was that of the battlefields and of popular resistance, and I found that when we dig into its roots, we discover that it relates to the model of women that has been engraved in the minds of men and women. It does not necessarily follow logical reasons as much as it follows a number of preset cultural and ideological forms that have the power of myths. Among popular folkloric Arab and Palestinian stories in which women play a starring role, I would like to highlight the story of *That Al Hemma*, which recounts the adventures and

accomplishments of the Palestinian princess Fatima Bint Mathloom Al-Kulabi. She is known in classical and popular Arabic literature as "Princess That Al Hemma," and her story is told in up to 26,000 pages. *That Al Hemma* displays the traits that characterize a successful leader, namely courage, bravery, and strength of character, as well as wisdom in maneuvering matters, which prepared her to be the leader of the Bani Klab, the army of her tribe that fought the Romans in the eighth century.

I investigated the active role of Palestinian women in the books *The Role of Palestinian Women in the Politics of the 1930s*; *The Role of Palestinian Women in the Politics of the 1940s*; *The Role of Palestinian Women in the Politics of the 1950s until the mid-1960s*; and *The Role of Palestinian Women in Politics from the mid-1960s until 1982*.

In these books, I selected marginalized women, forgotten women, and women pioneers in an attempt to shed light on their historical role since the 1930s and to make them visible.

It is fascinating to learn about the significant contribution made by Palestinian women in the 1930s to political activities in both the city and the countryside. Moreover, it is interesting

I always objected to giving dominance to one voice in any field of knowledge, be it politics, culture, criticism, or innovation. I believe in multiple voices with wide arenas in the interlinked fields of human and scientific knowledge, a matter that has led me to believe deeply in democracy.

Launching new Book at Mahmoud Darwish museum.
13 October 2015.



to note that although the role of urban women was focused on politics, the role of rural women was mainly focused on military activities.

Research has revealed a wide participation of Palestinian women in politics during the 1940s. At the time, women played an exceptional political and military role through the *Zahret Al Ukhwan* or “Daisy Flower” society. Prior to my research, it was little known that the members of this society secretly carried out military actions in addition to their humanitarian acts of nursing and caring for the wounded. The society was based in Jaffa and operated only for a short period of time. In the course of my research, I was able to correct the names of the founders of the society, Mahiba Khurshid and Nariman Khurshid, whose contribution has been disputed by various sources.

Research into the political contribution of women from the 1950s until the mid-1960s examined their participation in the Palestinian Arab party organizations and in politics, which had not previously been documented or explored. Studying the affiliation of Palestinian women

to Arab political parties, scholars noted family relationships between the names of female and male political activists, a matter that led them to the conclusion that the presence of women in these parties was by virtue of kinship rather than by virtue of ideological conviction. Testimonies of many narrators, however, suggest that their ideological affiliation to the parties was out of their own convictions and separate from the affiliation of their brothers, fathers, uncles, or husbands. These women mentioned, however, that their ideas were affected by discussions within their families.

Another study aimed to investigate the political participation of Palestinian women in the period from the mid-1960s until 1982. Aiming to fill empty spaces in the recorded history, it explores the role of the General Union of Palestinian Women since its inception in 1965, up until the invasion of Beirut in 1982, in particular the participation of Palestinian women within the armed Palestinian revolution, after 1965, and the outstanding role women played in the first Palestinian uprising in 1978. The study seeks to make

known what has not been recorded regarding the roles women played during that historical period, particularly regarding the social changes that have accompanied the increased political participation of Palestinian women.

The contribution of Palestinian women in the political field has grown and become more effective. Women have become more daring, stronger, and increasingly aware of their need to link the political struggle with the social, in order to ensure the preservation of their gains and to be able to bring about a radical societal change. They are fully aware and persevere despite the difficulty of both struggles. The character of the Palestinian woman has developed strength, toughness, and vigor. Thus she has become able to challenge, confront, and rebel against social restrictions that limit her ability to move and to participate and contribute to politics.

Oral history also plays a role in my creative writings *Will the Two Parts Combine?* and *The Rose of the Soul*, where I have highlighted the personalities of women with whom

I have interacted personally, through books, or recorded interviews.

And now?

Despite my awareness of the interconnectedness of the different fields of human knowledge, and in spite of my current involvement in oral history, creative writing, and specifically poetry, remains the nearest to my heart.

Faiha Abdulhadi, PhD, is a Palestinian writer, poet, research consultant, community activist, and lecturer with experience in various aspects of oral history, gender, literary critique, and politics. Dr. Abdulhadi is founder and director of Al-Rowat for Studies & Research and has published 12 books in addition to various studies and articles. Past experience includes positions as consultant researcher to UNICEF in Cairo and to the Directorate of Gender Planning and Development (Ministry of Planning in Palestine), as well as researcher for the Palestinian Research and Documentation Centre (UNESCO) in Palestine. Dr. Abdulhadi is a member of the Palestinian National Council and the regional coordinator of the organization Peace Women across the Globe.

Peace Women across the Globe, coordinators' meeting, Bern, 2015.

