
It was 1985; the place was Nairobi; the occasion, International Conference of Women. I was reading a poem before a group of women. The session ends, two groups come close to me: "We are Palestinian women". "We are South African women". "We also face the same problems of identity, freedom of expression and social constraints that you have described". "We are refugees in our own country. If we go back to the camp areas in Gaza, we feel ashamed of ourselves, because of the way the Israelis search our bodies and luggage and a few women have committed suicide". "We don't have passports or freedom of expression due to apartheid attitudes of the white rulers".

This was my second encounter with Palestinian women. My first encounter was in 1981, when I was translating Laila Khalid's autobiography *My People Shall Live*. In this work she had portrayed the Palestinian nationalist movement in detail, candidly describing all the groups involved in it.

The year 1995 provided another opportunity, that of a very personal and intimate meeting and dialogue with Madam Hind al-Hussaini and Ms. Laila Khalid on the occasion of Muslim Women Parliamentarians' Conference held in Islamabad.

Thanks to this background and my personal involvement and concern, I read with great interest the book *Daughters of Palestine* written by Amal Kawar which focuses on the camp life of Amman, Beirut, Tunis and Jerusalem. It traces the history of the homelessness of Palestinians from 1948 to 1994: a camp life with limitations on movement, on breathing, on interaction; a life devoid of any future, of the promise of independence.

The book starts with introducing the Palestinian national struggle with two chapters. Chapter I reviews the contribution of women of three generations right from 1948 to 1995, including the contribution of women who had served as advisers to Yasser Arafat. They were those who were politicized at a time when the Arab nationalist and leftist movements had reached their peak and President Nasser of Egypt had become the united voice of the whole Arab world. This was the second generation of activist women whereas the first generation, which is referred to as the "mother generation" of 1948, consisted of no more than 4 women who had initiated political struggle through charitable work. The third generation described in the book consisted of two groups: one residing in the West Bank, and the other living across the borders in the Arab countries. The third generation, however, proved to be the most crucial political catalyst which rose to leadership roles in the 1980s, primarily in the arena of international relations at the PLO headquarters in Tunis.
Chapter II, which is concerned with camp life in Amman, describes the early years of the revolutionary struggle in general. The Amman period was brief but pivotal in the history of the Palestine national movement in so far as it witnessed the rise of the Palestinian armed struggle to regain Palestine.

Chapter III describes the story of the struggle of women in the camp life, calling for an analysis of two different aspects of the character of camp life, viz. political struggle and social life.

The camp life in general has up until now been portrayed in the works on the subject in terms of political conflicts right from the Nazi camps to the Sarajevo camps, and has generally consisted of graphically describing the torture, rape, psychological persecution and shocks to which the inmates of the camps were subjected. The present work's portrayal of the camp life of Palestinian refugees, who persisted for several generations in the demand for their homeland, however, is an exception.

A lot has been written on the psychological aspects of the matter — the reactions of the Palestinian children and adults who spent considerable periods of time in the camps. Despite the large number of people involved, and the many works written, the camp life of Palestinian refugees has so far remained obscure. Daughters of Palestine, though it primarily aims at describing the Palestinian women's struggle, provides a vivid description of the life, reactions and interaction of the political struggle of the Palestinian inmates of the camp. Keeping this in mind, an analyst and observer of political developments in Palestine may note that the General Union of Palestinian Women was first formed in 1965 as a mobilization organization and was affiliated with the PLO. The Union followed a cautious approach to activism. It was a total of 34 women who played the key role in the political organizational developments. Of these 34 women, about half represented the charitable societies of the West Bank and the Gaza strip. The core of the national movement is said to be the product of the camp. Ordinary Palestinians as well as their leaders such as Abu Iyad and Abu Ammar (Yasser Arafat) were the children of the camps. The PLO Ambassador Shahid, explaining the camp life, says: "There is a kind of communication that is difficult to express in political science terms, something that is nearly spiritual".

We find another vivid description of the camp life in Amman describe by Jehan Helou, which provides a deep understanding of the situation prevailing in the camps:

I saw with my own eyes in 1969 when women in the camps — they faced the tanks . . . ordinary women and probably illiterate. And they were not organized; there weren't any cadres at that time any way. I mean, that shows how deep is the national issue inside the women.

The most important chapter of the book seems to deal with the camp life in Beirut, a city of vital importance for the Palestinians because of its proximity with Gaza and the West Bank as well as Jordan and Jerusalem. It is
in the early 1970s that the Palestinian women's organization became an important segment of the nationalist movement. The camps were recognized as the national forums for the representation of Palestinians. It was in the midst of international hustle and bustle that the PLO women travelled to Mexico to attend the Women's Conference in 1975. The unity of Arab women and their solidarity with Palestinians was symbolically displayed on the occasion of the speech of the wife of the Prime Minister of Israel, when registering the Arab-Palestinian protest, Abdul Hadi said: "We are protesting against the Zionist existence in Palestine and the ill treatment of our people in Palestine. That is why we are going to walk out [of the conference]. It is not something personal against Mrs. Rabin or against UNO".

The lessons learnt from the Amman camps and the Amman period of the Palestine national movement were applied in Beirut. The immediate point of stress was that the strategies of women's mobilization should be realistic and practical, regardless of the diversity of factions or ideological orientations. For to pursue realistic strategies was an idea on which all could agree. At this stage, talking and lecturing appeared ineffective. The tendency to raise empty slogans or cherish illusions also decreased. Democracy was introduced in the ranks of the Palestinians so much so that even children groups were formed. Orphans and widows were provided special training, and the families of martyrs were looked after with the aim of developing their abilities.

Thus was written a new chapter in political orientation. Male domination began to be criticized. Its existence was felt not only by women but also by liberal men. I quote an Arab Liberation Front member: "Men dominate the Palestinian women even in her own framework. The perception of the leadership and the perception of man in the "tanzim" has not changed, regarding the role of women, her capabilities and her rights, man still doubts capabilities of women, even she excelled, exhibiting her great capabilities, he is jealous of her and won't permit her to lead".

The women's movement was further chiselled out after the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila camps. Stories of rape like those of Sarajevo were not repeated. However, the gunning down and arrest of women were clear indicators of the designs of the Israelis. Palestinians as a nation realized for the first time the extent to which the power game of oil and financial resources had pushed back the slogans of anti-colonialism and anti-reactoryism in the Arab world.

The year 1982 brought about such colossal devastation that even the official records of the Palestinian movement were hard to find. Again, the Palestinians found themselves at the crossroads, facing the alternatives of either settling in Cyprus or Tunis. The conflicts between the different faction of the Palestinian national movement had also affected the women groups. The situation of women's leadership in the diaspora also did not improve. Likewise, the factions for and against Arafat also affected the women's movement. However, such elementary activities as holding literacy classes, imparting health education and arranging sewing classes were continued by all the factions.

During the years 1983–89, all the factions agreed on what they called a
This meant that while the parties agreed to disagree on the strategies to regain the homeland, they were united in affirming the PLO as the unchallenged voice of the Palestinian liberation movement.

At this stage the women's movement shifted from the camps to a three-storey building and a semblance of normalcy restored. The Palestinian movement saw reproach with USA and now Palestinian women attended Women's Decade Conference at Nairobi. Still a sea-saw of conflict was reigning within the Palestinian factions and the world powers. At Nairobi, some of the delegates of the superpowers were threatening the smaller countries: "If you vote in favour of the Palestinian Resolution, you will be finished". However, participation in the international conference did provide Palestinian women the logistics for political development, although women's representation in the Palestinian national movement remained no more than 7.5 per cent till 1980. The problem of low female representation in the factional conferences was due mainly to resistance at the middle leadership ranks. The National Council in its related meetings with a view to resolve political conflicts and put the seal of legitimacy on the courses of action expounded by Arafat obtained the women leadership's concurrence on the subject.

Now the women's movement was outside the camp's social structure of literacy, health and basic rights of the politically independent nations. Eventually the social umbrella of the women got somewhat politically tilted. Still the social attitude which allocated politics to men was dominant, assigning authority and role model to men. The new breed of politicians, however, proposed Ms. Hanan Ashrawi, a Western oriented politician, as the spokesperson of PLO. Now the responsibility of women was, in varying degrees, to re-strategize and re-define the Palestinian movement and put that image across the mainstream public of the Western countries and even Israel. The result was a seven-point declaration, identifying that both Israelis and Palestinians should share the land "based on the principle of territorial separation". The 1989 meeting revealed agreement on some of the most important items of dispute between the PLO and Israel.

The role of women's involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations has been discussed in the chapter relating to women's committees in the occupied territory. This chapter reveals that students were now the vital group, which was formed to stage protest against the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty. The same committee and the same persons subsequently neutralized the stand against the Israelis, and the idea of self-rule of the Palestinians was being advocated in research centres, community health clinics, and labour and professional unions.

One can perhaps sum up by saying that the political arena of the first generation of women was charitable work. The leadership of the second and third generations in the occupied territories was, however, never content with merely charitable work. These two generations pejoratively labelled the concept of social change through charitable work as a merely elitist ideology since
charitable work was perceived to form part of social rather than political activity.

The collapse of the Soviet Bloc led the women groups to start taking up a variety of women's rights issues. Al-Fath's Diab of the Social Work committees concurred, saying: "Of course the woman should have the same personal freedom as the man". Khriesheh of the Working Women's Committee and Kamal of Women Action Committee declared: "We not only want simply political rights but also to use political rights to get our social rights". In this connection Ms. Nassar of the Palestinian Women Committee (of the Popular Front) said that the battle for rights must not be defined as "anti-male". Kamal also added: "The question sometimes is not a question of the woman and the man. The woman can be more oppressive than the man, I mean of the woman. What is more important is the idea that the woman has".

The Palestinian social landscape which was more or less traditional in the camps, received an impetus to move in two directions. The women's committees working for political interaction took up the task of interaction and support to the women and families whose sons had been arrested and whose daughters were not going to schools. Responsibility for further political work was entrusted to the local women's committees. The entry of the women's committees into the villages was a tremendous breakthrough in the nationalist struggle since it led to an increasing involvement of women.

Still, factionalism on the political front among women was not over; rather political factionalism brought competition in imparting social and political education and executing welfare programmes: "to enter the location in which kindergartens are set up so as to enter a relationship with the masses in those location".

When the concept of social change was introduced in the political education of Palestinians, it led to a militant response to Israeli cruelties. The world began to witness young boys and hijab-wearing women throwing stones at the occupation soldiers, and women's visibility continued to increase as it was never before.

The book as a whole describes the evolution of women's struggle through four generations. The major part of the description encompasses the orthodox structure of the Palestinians society where women had separate groups to structure out the web of basic needs, security, socialization and political consciousness.

The book also deals at length with international political conflicts that directly or indirectly either generated or conversely discouraged political factionalism among the Palestinians.

The earlier published works on the history of the Palestinian movement record the early phase of resistance, of militant fight and co-ordinated strategies of which women were an integral part. The militant movement which made the so-called Great Powers declare Palestinians as "terrorists" has not been described in the book. One might approve or disapprove of that but it is a fact that the world politicians did take notice of the magnitude of the problem of
Palestine when such acts as the highjacking of an aeroplane and/or the bombing of the occupied territory because of the suicidal actions of the militant youth jolted the world to realize that Palestine was an important problem that cried for solution.

The most interesting and undiscussed aspect is the question relating to the nature of life and politics in post-independent Palestine. Being a state of Muslims, the obvious implications of being an Islamic-oriented state, of women wearing veils or going about unveiled, and such other questions have not been touched. The Palestinian society is being influenced by religious resurgence as in some other Arab countries such as Egypt and Algieria, a resurgence which is also manifest in such Palestinian movements as Hamas and Islamic Jihād. However, the Palestinians, on the whole, with the active support of women, have so far shown less concern for religious than for political issues. They have been more oriented to political matters and have shown enthusiasm for democracy. It is perhaps significant that in their draft of the Basic Law, the Palestinians have chosen the gender-natural term, "person".

The years 1993-94 proved to be a catalyst for the empowerment of Palestinian women on issues like leadership training, women's rights under Islamic law, etc., since the women's leadership was determined to remain at the forefront of the struggle for Palestinian statehood and women's liberation.

Now something about the style of treatment of the subject. Amal Kawar follows the style of candid, concrete, and direct discourse. She neither philosophizes nor resorts to rhetoric. Even the rise of Muslim nationhood which is an extremely important, and in the opinion of some, an ominous development and has been an important factor in shaping the attitude of the Palestinians during the last fifty years, has been described by the author without passing any judgement on it, leaving it to the readers to decide for themselves.

It is a unique study, but let us not forget that the struggle itself is also unique. I wish there had been some comparative studies from the Israeli side since such studies might have enabled each nation to learn from the other. Perhaps the politicians of Pakistan would have realized the importance of a simultaneous socio-political development of men and women.

During the last five years, much has been written on Palestine and Yasser Arafat. Amal Kawar's book is one solid study in which political history has been treated from a human angle and the sensitivity of a woman. It would perhaps be pertinent to observe that the role of women in the Palestine movement is even more conspicuous and important than elsewhere, including the struggle for independence in America.

Kishwar Naheed