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WOMEN, BORDERS AND RESISTANCE IN IBTISAM BARAKAT'S BALCONY ON THE MOON: COMING OF AGE IN PALESTINE

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ABSTRACT

Palestine territories, characterized by constant conflicts and associated violence, are known for the various borders governing the lives of their inhabitants. Apart from borders with geopolitical significance, there are also other kinds of borders operating on the basis of gender, religion and ethnicity. For women in Palestine, borders abound in multiple forms, and resistance includes dealing with the restrictions imposed by political borders and those imposed by gender. Though narratives dealing with geopolitical conflicts in Palestine have come up, not much scholarly attention has been paid to the negotiation of borders, nationalism and territorialization of memory as experienced by women. Stories and experiences narrated by women from the margins throw a new light upon the multiple effects of settler colonialism in Palestine. Ibtisam Barakat's memoir Balcony on the Moon: Coming of Age in Palestine is one such work focusing on the author's growing up years in Palestine and women's ways of managing the precariousness and control mechanisms operating around them. It also throws light upon their domestic existence in the midst of political conflicts. This paper aims to explore the lived experiences of women in Palestine borderlands and their bond with their homeland as portrayed in Ibtisam Barakat's memoir. It also intends to study how the memories of negotiating gender and border are used as a means of resistance against both patriarchy and settler colonialism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Territories of contention and conflicts are often sites where individuals navigate through conflicting claims and counter claims regarding identity, race, ethnicity, nation, culture, and power. Border areas especially witness people being subjected to cascading struggles and vulnerabilities, mainly governed by the tenets of belongingness and othering. Thus, as Susan Smith remarks; "Borders are intriguing places for those interested in the construction of identity. They are the points where worlds meet and are held apart or spliced together in forms that contain, illustrate and shield the existence of massive, tangible differences in intentions and interests" (qtd. in Abrams and Hunt, 193). Borderlands in Palestine-

Israel region are no different and witness a multilayered system of oppression. Borders are performed through official demarcations like green line, fences, gates, walls, checkposts. In addition, various informal boundaries, always in flux, are formed every day.

For decades, Palestinian life revolved around managing such borders created by settler colonialism. For Palestinian women, hurdles posed by the violence and oppression of hegemonic powers are compounded by the patriarchal oppression in their own community. In addition to gender roles, their lives and identities were forged in a burning crucible of border conflicts and political moves. The nexus of politics and culture often denied them access to their basic rights. Their lives are governed by "masculine assumptions of rivalry, competition and inevitable conflict" (Heywood, 422). They wage an everyday battle against multiple borders. As Pamela Urrutia Arestizábal writes in her article "Occupation, Conflict and Patriarchy: Impacts on Palestinian Women": Most of them have lived their entire lives or most of their lives under occupation and in a context of prolonged conflict that continues to cause death, population displacement, the gradual deterioration of the human rights situation, high levels of poverty and unemployment and serious health problems. Their experiences of occupation and conflict have also been conditioned by unequal gender relations in a traditional and patriarchal Palestinian society that determines specific vulnerabilities, limitations in the exercise of rights and inequalities in access to resources and opportunities due to the stereotypes and expectations regarding the roles that men and women should play. Therefore, in their everyday lives, Palestinian women face multiple forms of violence and discrimination, both in the public and private spheres, in one more manifestation of what feminists, in their analysis of women, war and peace, have identified as a continuum of violence. In this context, many families are separated, including husbands and wives, parents and children and extended families, and this has a traumatic impact on Palestinian women affected by the policy. (1)

Palestinian women writers have pointed out these aspects through their writings. They reject the idea that a woman's experience can be reduced to only gender. Rather, Palestinian women's experiences are shaped by multiple factors including race, ethnicity, nationality, social and economic status etc. Life narratives by Palestinian women portray their own versions of Palestine – Israel conflicts. As Simona Sharoni observes, these writers: place women at the center rather than on the margins of the political arena. Thus, these books mark a welcome departure from the trend of simply adding women to conventional accounts of political life. By illustrating how the course of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict has been and continues to be shaped significantly by gender, the authors offer new insights into the history and dynamics of the conflict, and the prospects for its just and lasting resolution. (487).

Many of these narratives often go beyond the political realm and focus on the domestic lives of Palestinian women and their resistance against patriarchal constraints. They recollect the lives in border regions, portray their love for homeland, and focus on the battle against the injustice of their liminal existence. Their memoirs can be considered as quilts weaving together multiple strands of gender, border and memory. As Fatma Kassem observes, "Told in their own words, these women's experiences serve as a window for examining the complex intersections of gender, history, memory, nationalism and citizenship in a situation of ongoing colonization and violent conflict between Palestinians and the Zionist State of Israel" (1). Mariam Barghouti's comment that "fundamentally speaking, feminism cannot support racism, supremacy and oppressive domination in any form" can also be applied to these works. The scope of studying such narratives lies

in the fact that they unveil an epistemology centered on their real-life experiences and material realities, hitherto concealed under the plethora of male narratives widely circulated and commented upon in the mainstream consciousness. It helps the reader to become more aware of the different intersections - socio economic, cultural and political systems of oppression – to come up with more significant and effective production, study and transmission of situated knowledge.

Ibtisam Barakat's memoir Balcony on the Moon: Coming of Age in Palestine is one such memoir dealing with a woman's experience of settler colonialism, border conflicts, patriarchal dominance in their lives and their attempts to resist and overcome these barriers. Barakat is a Palestinian writer, translator, educationist and peace activist. Published in 2016, her work Balcony on the Moon: Coming of Age in Palestine traces her childhood and adolescent days in occupied territories of Palestine. It is characterized by her constant quest for freedom of choice, intolerance for injustice and pursuit for independence overriding social norms. Even as it provides us details of the politically charged atmosphere of Palestine borderlands, she focuses more on the consequences of borderland conflicts on the everyday lives of ordinary people, especially women. This paper titled "Gender, Border and Memory in Ibtisam Barakat's Balcony on the Moon: Coming of Age in Palestine intends to analyse Palestinian women's narrative from the twin vantage points of border and gender. It analyses the multiple boundaries cutting through Palestinian women's lives, operated by various forces as it focuses on the gendered experiences of living in occupied Palestine amidst settler colonialism and cultural restrictions. It also studies how women attempt to formulate their sense of agency amidst the many restrictions. The present study of Barakat's narrative reveals that memories of navigating gender and border are used as a means of resistance against hegemony and to address everyday social, economic, political and cultural concerns.

Barakat's memoir is strategically structured into different episodes named after various places her family moved into during her growing up period. This constant shifting is one chief characteristic of border lands where people are often forced to leave their homes because of hostilities. Palestinian borderlands are often characterized by borders which migrated over people. This process destroys old communities and shapes new ones, causes resettlements, deportations, and even ethnic cleansing, creates new minorities or homogenizes population inside the new borders" (Zhurzhenko 65). She observes that "intended to erase memories and to unify the cultural landscape, the politics of readjusting the populations to the (moving) political boundaries produced, instead, new victimized groups and 'communities of memory" (63) This is very much evident as we read Barakat's memoir as she discusses her family's move to different locales, often in a bid to live peacefully. She is filled with a nostalgic longing for the land she lost. She writes, "Most of me still lives at the stone house we left behind on top of a hill near Nablus Road on the northeastern side of Ramallah" (6). She goes on to write "I think about that house every day, but it is no longer made of stone. Now it is made of memories" (6).

This exemplifies Tatiana Zhurzhenko's opinion that new minorities created by border migration indulge in nostalgia and resist change. Zhurzhenko borrows Burke's idea to point out that "the losers are unable to accept what happened and are condemned to brood over it, relive it, and reflect how different it might have been" (66). The case of intruding borders migrating into their home and violating their personal space is well described in her book. She recollects how the Israeli soldiers entering their home space forced them to sell their home and move to a different place. She writes, "We came here. I wish we hadn't, and that the Israeli

soldiers had gone to train somewhere else instead" (9). The trauma of clandestine uprooting is well present in these lines.

This migration of borders also results women being subjected to physical violence. A hint of such a gendered memory is evident when Barakat writes of the Israel soldiers' behaviour as they came to their home asking for water. She recollects, "They looked at Mother as though she was the water they wanted to drink" (8). When they move into the basement of the new apartment where they are hidden from all eyes, her mother is happy. The power imbalance between seeing and being seen is portrayed here. This resounds Gloria Anzaldua's thoughts when she writes, "A glance can freeze us in the place; it can "possess" us. It can erect a barrier against the world. But in a glance also lies awareness and knowledge" (42). Here the soldier's look leads the author's mother to be possessed by the awareness of her gender and her status as the other. She is conscious of various stories of gendered violence and the soldier's possible thoughts of subjecting her to physical violence. In a research study by Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, it is observed that: Many women and girls described violent acts committed by Israeli soldiers and settlers. Some women personally witnessed such incidents, while others only discussed incidents they had heard about. Whether they had directly witnessed them or not, women expressed genuine feelings of fear towards these situations. They also noted the arbitrary character of the occupation's arrest practices. Women's feelings of insecurity were heightened by the impression that they might be victims of violence for unknown reasons or for no reason at all. (Chaban et al. 18)

This shows that Palestinian women's sense of security is deeply entwined with the political developments in Palestinian territories and border troubles. Such intrusion of borders and bordering agents into everyday lives also lead to body memories. Body memory in the words of Deridee McKay can be loosely defined as "bodily thinking that occurs through proprioception of a deep-seated physiological change – the knot in the stomach, the weight on the shoulders, the heaviness of the heart" (Blachnicka-Ciacek 2). Blachnicka-Ciacek goes on to say that:

These memories of the occupation reveal the all-encompassing character of Israeli control over Palestinian lives that is produced through spatial control over bodies. Palestine is remembered through bodies that are harassed, suffer, and are full of anxiety. These body mediated memories – of both public and intimate private spaces - reveal the overwhelming scale of everyday violence in which no space can be considered safe and free from this control. (4)

However, bodies are also "remembered as sites of resistance" (Blachnicka-Ciacek 5) as revealed by the narrator as she remembers surreptitiously sneaking off to an anti-occupation demonstration and going to work despite her parents forbidding her to do so. Thus, Barakat's memoir reveals the "overwhelming sense of control and fear that accompanied their childhood and adolescence" (6). It also reveals the author's acts of resistance against both the occupiers and her own cultural restrictions. Thus, "Palestinians' bodies – injured and harassed, but yet surviving and remembering – can be seen as sites of 'counter-memories' and new 'emotional geographies' that resist the hegemonic narratives of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict" (Blachnicka-Ciacek 6). In the case of Palestinian women, these sites also challenge the patriarchal hegemony in Palestine culture.

Borderland conflicts affect women even when they are not directly subjected to physical or emotional violence. The case of the author's father exemplifies this point. Barakat's father suffers from narcolepsy, a condition which doesn't allow him properly work. He feels he is unable to take care of his family. He loses his finger in

an accident because of this. She writes: He grieves that in losing part of his thumb he lost part of his fingerprint, his identity. When letting himself feel this loss, he also finds himself remembering how much he misses a world that his thumb once touched: his mother's face, his father's hands—both of whom are dead—his many relatives whom he does not see because borders are closed. (26)

His sense of inadequacy is heightened by the colonial presence which took away everything including his land, from him. His low esteem and powerlessness erupt when he explodes at his wife for attending school with strange men inorder to complete her education. As Anzaldua comments, "the loss of a sense of dignity and respect in the macho breeds a falso machismo which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them" (83). This can also be attributed to the fact that many cultures across the world considers women as border guards separating what is 'ours' from 'them.' They are considered to be guarded from the other so as to exert 'our' ownership of women. Thus, exerting control over women is akin to exerting control over the Other. Women are also asked to comply and desist from committing socially wrong (Aayb) acts. Their family members are bothered about what society will perceive of their women if they attempt to violate social norms. As a recent study conducted by Stephanie Chaban, Reema Daraghmeh and Garance Stettler points out: Rumours and gossip directed at women and girls prevail among the communities where they reside, irrespective of whether in cities, villages or refugee camps. Since Palestinian women and girls are placed at the core of issues related to family and community honour, their movements in the public sphere are seen to reflect upon their nuclear and extended families. Women's access to the public sphere may be deemed immoral or inappropriate, depending on the situation. Thus, rumours and gossip, whether based on actual or perceived actions, serve as a potent form of female control and a source of fear and insecurity. (24)

Thus, the Palestinian patriarchal system oppresses the women as much as the occupational forces. Barakat writes that "Aayb is a reply I hear more than any other expression. This is the one word that can stand in the way of a girl like a roadblock" (93). In another instance, author's mother is allowed to continue her education with the condition that her son will act as her unofficial male guardian by enrolling in the same school. Such casual acts of male guardianship practiced in Palestinian communities, is a way in which "culture professes to protect women. Actually, it keeps women in rigidly defined roles" (Anzaldua17) of the good obedient wives and mothers. Anzaldua goes on to point out that "educated or not, the onus is still on the woman to be a wife/ mother" (17). They are termed as failures and selfish if they refuse to fit into these roles. The author's recollection of her aunt being pressurized for a son despite having 10 daughters, her own mother's longing for sons, her own refusal to get married inviting the wrath of her family are instances of cultural dictums made by the males for women to obey and transact. These might seem like description of their everyday life. But: The everyday routines traced by women are never unimportant, because the seemingly banal and trivial events of the everyday are bound into the power structures which limit and confine women. The limits on women's everyday activities are structured by what society expects women to be and therefore to do. The everyday is the arena through which patriarchy is (re)created – and contested. (Rose)

Barakat's attempts to challenge the patriarchal customs in her culture is evident as she questions her mother why she wouldn't be known as Um Ibtisam (Mother of Ibtisam) instead of Um Basel (Mother of Basel, her son). She refuses to do the extra household work allotted to her because she happens to be a girl. She is thrilled to perform on stage in a school programme because she anticipates that it will be close

to the pleasure of calling the athan, the prayer. Because in her religion, a woman is not allowed to perform the call to prayer. She doesn't believe that marriage would rescue her from the sanctions imposed upon by her religion and the colonising forces of borderland. She is outraged at the injustices happening around her. She says, "We get enough humiliation from living under harsh military rule" (102). She also describes valiant acts of resistance featuring her own mother, who refuses to be the Boxer (the workhorse from Animal Farm) of her husband and restarts her education disrupted by early marriage. Her mother is shown to be simultaneously exerting her agency of choice and complying to the social rules whenever it suits her. This shows the new tactics adopted by women to circumvent the rules imposed upon them. Her mother represents the woman who wants to better her situation yet claims the security of her family acceptance, under the looming threat of occupation.

Barakat also attempts to describe border troubles through her work. She writes of her mother's response on hearing the attack by Egypt and Syria on Israel border is "War has a way of displacing people in the blind of an eye, and we must be ready to go" (51). She also describes how young girls lose interest in their soap operas as war looms. What is passed on to the reader is a gendered experience of the border. She talks of how her grandparents separated because one couldn't cross the borders because she loved her homeland and the other couldn't bear to be in his homeland under occupation. This incident finds parallel in Pamela Urrutia Arestizábal's words as she observes: In their daily lives, Palestinian women are affected by a set of physically and bureaucratically imposed movement restrictions that impede them from moving about freely. The obstacles they face on a day-to-day basis include the separation wall, Israeli checkpoints, road closures, a permit system and a discriminatory legal system. This system significantly restricts their mobility and has many repercussions on human rights, affecting their access to healthcare, education, employment and social and family life. (7)

The author says that "any Palestinian who leaves the border is not guaranteed re-entry" (148) thus hinting at the border mechanism which opens for some and closes before some.

This selective bordering process is further highlighted when she describes the snipers who keep watches on top of high buildings and enter homes randomly to show that they are in charge. What operates here is a Banopticon. The Banopticon "deals with the notion of exception, and the difference between surveillance for all but control of only a few" (Bigo 6). Here the surveillance of everyone is adopted for the safety of Israelites. But control is essentially reserved for Palestinians, the Other. All these instances show how occupied territories become landscapes of displacement and power through its various bordering processes. It also shows how borders "can fold inward, enveloping and containing individuals and groups in societies within particular regiments of governmentality. Or they can fold outward, restricting entry and expelling irregular migrants" (Rajaram & Grundy Warr)

The Barakat sisters are well aware of the lines that may split them one day and devise a way to outsmart the bordering process. She devises a plan: "Let us have an imaginary balcony on the moon," I say. "If we cannot see each other in person, when the moon is full, and we can see it from wherever we happen to be living, we can gaze upward, climb to the sky like we climb the staircase of the Salah Building, and meet there. If I don't find you when I get to our moon balcony, I will leave you a long letter with my news. Don't forget to do the same. (201) This poetic plan refers to the many ways deviced by borderland inmates to stay in touch despite the boundaries running across their lives.

According to Fatim Kassem, "Masculine hegemonies efface women as a category of analysis from the areas of public memory, transforming them into dispossessed and non-historical beings, and failing to acknowledge their active social participation and contribution in the process" (5). But Barakat's narrative reveal a woman with strong political consciousness deeply attached to her homeland. She remembers Palestinian women who were political activists. Dalal al- Mughrabi, a member of PLO, who crossed the borders to avenge the killing of a Palestine military leader and who was killed in the ensuing conflict, later on becomes an icon of courage and resistance. Barakat's own teacher was a political activist who was imprisoned for her political views. This shows how Palestinian women are conscious of the national struggle and yearns for the freedom from occupation just as their male counterparts. All these are examples of gendered experiences of activism and violence, marginalized in mainstream narratives.

Barakat's pain of being in a liminal state in her own land is evident as she describes the one-inch map charm of historic Palestine. According to her, "it is the only inch of Palestine many girls can take with them wherever they go" (158). This hints at the loss of spatial control of Palestine territories as well as the uncertain terrains awaiting Palestinian girls when they are married off and displaced from their homes. She creates a newspaper of her own by cutting out words and images and interchanging them. She writes, "I decide to put the words in different places. Now the word Palestinian is in the place of the word Israeli, and Israeli in the place of Palestinian. What a new world!" (132). Her disgust with the bloodshed around her is evident as she writes, "Then I put the words violence, retaliation, and terrorism in the obituaries section. Among the dead I place military occupations from anywhere in the world. Among the dead I place all weapons. Among the dead I place cruelty. Among the dead I place discrimination. Among the dead I place history that repeats itself" (132). Her knowledge of the trauma caused by border contention is revealed as she writes, "Among the birth announcements, I place freedom for everyone, and a hospital for everyone's visible and invisible wounds. Whole nations can be admitted free of charge to this hospital so that they can recover from harsh histories" (133). Her passion for freedom makes her create "a big section for girls, and one page for ce-liberat-ions: when people liberate themselves from things they do not like and gain new freedoms" (133). She writes of the fragmented lives in her homeland as she says, "The paper looks like it has gone through an operation and is healing, all of its wounds closing" (133). What is revealed through this description is a deep knowledge of the fact that "the answer to the problem between the white race and the coloured, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundations of our lives, our culture, our language, our thoughts" (Anzaldua 82).

Barakat also notices the absence of Palestine history in her textbooks and how they have to furtively go through study material dealing with Palestine. Her political awareness and feminist consciousness are what makes her help a fellow Palestinian girl during the exams. Because "We are made to live with no land, no country, no rights, no safety, and no respect for our dignity. The world is cheating Palestinians, and it is cheating girls even more" (211). What is unraveling in Barakat's memoir is the formation of an essentially female collective memory. Her memories show that "women's stories offer a radically innovative contribution to the ongoing construction of the Palestinian historical narrative" (Kassem 5). It also shows that "women are political and historical actors who take part in building their communities and social relations, albeit from localized positions" (7). As British writer Ethel Mannin observes: Anyone who still believes that the "Arab woman" is back-ward and timid must have missed out on the press reports which have been

appearing in the first months of this year. . .Occupation provokes resistance, and increasingly Arab women and girls will find a way to protest, to harass the enemy, to demonstrate, and to refuse cooperation. This is a certainty because, contrary to popular notion, the "Arab woman" is high spirited and both physically morally courageous. . . quite certainly as the resistance intensifies and develops, as it is doing all the time, we are going to hear more of her (Qtd in The Struggle of Palestinian Women 6). This is well unraveled through the writings of Barakat.

What Barakat, restricted by her own culture and the settlers, ultimately creates through her writing is a new space and culture. In Gloria Anzaldua's words, such women "stand and claim their space making a new culture with their own lumber, their own bricks and mortar and their own feminist architecture" (22). Barakat's passion for words thus empowers her. She writes: Stories take me on an adventure and change my feelings, as though I am not me, but the main character in the story. I sail into mysteries, monsters hide everywhere, but I battle them and triumph, and always return home, bringing back gifts for everyone who waits for me.

I also triumph over fear by listening to old people tell of memories that bring peaceful faraway worlds to me. I like how their faces light up when they describe happy times of burreyyah, freedom. Their words give me hope and chase way my fears.

Thus, when Barakat writes and shares her memories as a woman living in a borderland, these memories act as forces of subversion and change and resist the hegemonic narratives popularized by the oppressors. She makes sure that nationalist narratives do not marginalize discourses on women's liberation.

Barakat's memoir reveals the inherent connection between various struggles faced by Palestinian women in their homeland. Education of women evolves as a means of liberation from oppression. Barakat's work points out that women's narrative go beyond narratives of political violence and unveil the nuances of the domestic world of women. They also shatter the one-dimensional image of vulnerable, voiceless Palestinian woman and show them exerting their agencies as much as they can. Small acts of resistance and everyday practices of refusals which bring about a feminist mode of engagement and knowing are portrayed. These narratives are also accounts of the sociopolitical, historical and economic conditions that have constrained and enabled, challenged and enhanced the freedom and opportunities of Palestinian women. Borders for example, come across as lived spaces and are often seen to be unkind to its female inhabitants. They also emphasize the view that liberation of homeland and its women go hand in hand. By sharing these narratives with the rest of their community and world, they are contributing towards Palestinian collective memory regarding their land and culture. Their deep attachment to the homeland and agony over its present state inherent in their narrative contributes towards a territorialization of memory.

Women writers including Barakat can be considered what Anna Ball in her essay "Wing women Towards a Feminocentric Poetics of Flight in Twenty-First Century Palestinian Creative Consciousness" terms as wing woman. A wing woman is a person who: presents a form of movement founded in partnership and solidarity that traverses sites of power imbalance, abuse, and violence perpetuated both within airspace, and on the ground—in territories at once geographical and gendered. Hers is a transformational political agenda borne from the perception of injustice and desire for freedom generated by both her Palestinian-ness, and her femaleness. As such, she moves at the cusp of international movements that circulate within the twenty first century landscape. (205)

Voicing out the memories of their history and land helps them to reclaim their lost homeland and identity and resist hegemonic narratives. It also helps them to oppose the structural patriarchy in their society and carve out a space and identity of their own. Transmission of such narratives also inspires their compatriots and counterparts from various conflict-ridden parts of their world to fight their battles with more vehemence and vigour. Analysis of Palestinian women's narratives also point out the need to create a more effective intersectional methodological structure suitable for the study and transmission of such texts. This in turn will gain them a wider audience among popular culture and academic circles, transform them into a political tool and aid in the betterment of their subjects.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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