

# Palestinian Women Writers in English: Compromising National and Feminist Agendas

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## Abstract

The article analyses the intersection of Palestinian nationalism and feminism as represented in literary and political discourse. Through an examination of well-established historical discourses surrounding the Palestinian situation, this study reframes the notion that feminist political projects and nationalism are incompatible. By utilizing the framework of postcolonial feminism, this analysis scrutinizes the depiction of Palestinian women in narratives of national struggle as agents, symbols, and authors. Employing historical analysis and literary criticism as sources of data, this article investigates the development of Palestinian women's activism from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. It underscores the impact that women had on the Palestinian literary canon, their contributions to the national movement, and the emergence of indigenous feminisms. Notwithstanding the comparatively masculine conception of nationalist agency that permeates Palestinian nationalism, this qualitative study investigates the ways in which national struggle stimulated the advancement of Palestinian women. This encompasses discussions concerning gender awareness and the methods through which women defied cultural and societal norms through active participation in the national struggle and substantial literary contributions. This study is of significant value as it critically examines the complex relationship between feminism and nationalism in the Palestinian context, while also challenging the assumptions made by Western feminism. Through an examination of the experiences and perspectives of Palestinian women, this study underscores the ways in which the concurrent reinforcement of nationalist sentiments and reclamation of feminist narratives empower Palestinian women and bolster support for the Palestinian cause, thus making a significant contribution to the nation's pursuit of independence.

**Keywords:** Agency, feminism, masculinity, Palestinian nationalism, Palestinian women, postcolonial feminism.

## 1. Introduction

This article expands on the notion that Third World feminist consciousness, exemplified by Palestinian feminism has progressed in tandem with nationalism since the inception of significant political events in Palestinian history. While much research focuses on Palestinians' colonial oppression, this paper seeks to establish a connection between national movements and feminist agendas. To achieve this, the article explores the extent the two identification markers of Palestinian women's representation in narrative, namely feminism and nationalism, successfully capture the political milestones of Palestinian history. This exploration is facilitated through employing a postcolonial feminist approach in exploring the role of women's literary productions in restoring women's voices and elucidating their contributions to the survival of the Palestinian people against the backdrop of a male-dominated literary narrative. Within the context of Palestinian nationalistic narratives, national agency appears to assume a masculine prerogative that is oppositional to femininity. Consequently, women's concerns are often relegated to a subordinate status in the context of national struggle as women frequently find themselves obligated to prioritize national masculine projects over feminist ones. Therefore, in order to reconcile the contradictions between nationalist and feminist agendas, a more accurate evaluation of women's nationalist participation as actors, symbols and authors is required.

### 1.1 Palestinian Nationalist Feminism

Western feminist scholarship often describes nationalism and feminism as antithetical (Cockburn, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2009; Herr, 2003; Rouhana, 2003; Trinh & Trinh, 1989; Petersen, 1984) because "nationalist causes often situate women between two extremes, viewing them either as emblems of cultural authenticity locked within traditional roles or as participants in masculinist political struggles—struggles that typically impel women to lay aside female roles in response to nationalist exigencies" (Majaj, Sunderman, & Saliba 2002, 25). In essence,

for Western feminists, nationalist projects are frequently seen oppositional in relation to feminist agendas as the former seeks to naturalize gender roles, whereas the latter "seeks to question and upset normative gender roles" (Olivius & Hedström 2019, 1).

Nonetheless, in non-Western contexts, national struggles have been catalysts to the mobilization of 'indigenous' feminisms (Olivius & Hedström, 2019). The Palestinian situation casts a new light on the postulation that nationalism is at odds with feminist political endeavors, proving that feminism can indeed coincide with nationalism as women's rights cannot be isolated from the political context. In fact, "[i]n the Palestinian case, feminism evolved directly out of nationalism, and the salience of national oppression made it impossible for gender transformation and feminist identities to be disengaged from national self-determination and national identities" (Hasso 1998, 19). Echoing Hasso's perspective, Kuttab (2009) also argues that national struggle provided an impetus to the growth of Palestinian women's gender consciousness and empowered them to defy social and cultural norms imposed on them. This article demonstrates the significant success of feminism and nationalism as a combined project since the beginning of pivotal political events in Palestinian history.

Palestinian women have actively participated in nationalism with their activism dating back to the early waves of Jewish settlers from 1882-1903, continuing towards the Intifadas and into modern history (Fleischmann, 2003). In fact, Jacoby (1996) outlines in detail women's mobilization beginning with resistance against the first phase of Jewish settlers between 1882-1903 and later against British Mandate forces (1918-1948). This period witnessed the institutionalization of women's movements through the establishment of "the first Arab Palestinian Women's Union in Jerusalem in 1921... followed by the first Arab Women's Congress of Palestine in 1929" (Jacoby, 1996, 5). Women's organizations in this period, however, primarily focused on achieving national self-determination and lacked demands for the improvement of women's lives and rights, as they "made little attempt to extract their own problems and prospects from those of the larger social body" (Peteet 1992, 20).

The involvement of Palestinian women's activism continued in 1948 following the establishment of the state of Israel, during which time women established and managed many traditional charitable organizations (ibid). According to Kawar (1996, 2), women in 1948 marked the first generation of Palestinian women leadership, often referred to as "mothers' generation". Women in the first generation were primarily components of a vibrant civil society as they were involved in charity organizations that mainly consisted of middle and upper-class societal work (ibid). According to James (2013), the first generation's political consciousness laid the groundwork for the emergence of female political voices and allowed for greater participation by the second and third generations.

Later, with the eruption of the 1967 war, women continued to participate in political activism and demonstrations alongside their male counterparts. It was not until the 1970s, however, that women's feminist activism reached its zenith. The recently formed institutions were managed by a fresh cohort of young and recently politically aware Palestinian women. These institutions revitalized previous grassroots resistance methods by engaging a wider spectrum of women, encompassing camp residents, farmers, impoverished city dwellers, students, and female laborers (Jacoby, 1996). Additionally, Kawar (1996) asserts that women's activism in political struggle was initiated by the "second generation" of women, whose work eventually became politicized and entwined with the national resistance movement.

The "third generation" of the Palestinian women's movement comprises women leaders who were born during the 1967 war (Kawar, 1996). The majority of women who subscribed to this movement were born as refugees in diaspora, nonetheless, they maintained close collaboration with Palestinian women in the occupied territories (ibid). Kawar (1996) further introduces a fourth generation of Palestinian women leaders who emerged during the Intifada. This group primarily consisted of academic Palestinian women whose contributions to the Palestinian cause were focused on speaking and writing about the social, health, and economic situations of women living under occupation. Moreover, the Intifada was the time when middle-aged traditional Palestinian women "expressed willingness to question traditional values which require their exclusion from the political sphere" (Sabbagh 1989, 62).

### *1.2 Shunning of the Feminine within Official Palestinian National Discourse*

Although Palestinian women's feminism is situated within a nationalist framework, the national project is described using masculine-centric notions and gendered references to women that reflect traditionally constructed images of Palestinian society. Abdo (1994) and Abdulhadi (1994) both argue that a paradox of agency can be established when tracing the representation of women in national narratives. On the one hand, women are presented as active agents in the national discourse in their role as biological reproducers of the nation through their conceptions of fighters. In fact, the late Palestinian president Yasser Arafat referred to the womb of the Palestinian woman as "the best weapon of the Palestinian people" (Hamamra 2021,1).

On the other hand, women have been reduced to passive symbols of the land, as the land of Palestine is metamorphosed into a woman who has been sexually violated and whose body has been appropriated. Massad (1995) argues that masculine discourse is inherent in the founding documents of Palestinian nationalism such as the Palestinian Nationalist Charter, the Declaration of Independence, the Palestinian National Charter and Communiqués of the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU). In these documents, the land of Palestine is referred to in feminine terms and described as a chaste virgin that has been violated by the sexual assault of Zionists who are presented as violent and abusing men. In essence, women are primarily characterized by their biological role in conceiving and producing "manhood, respect, and dignity" (communiqué No. 5 of the UNLU as cited in Massad 1995, 46).

Moreover, Palestinian identity is defined in relational terms to men and is described as one that is "transmitted from fathers to sons" (Article 4 Palestinian Nationalist Charter as cited in Massad 1995, 44). Additionally, it is paternity that warrants citizenship, as declared in Article 5 of the Palestinian Nationalist Charter, "everyone who is born of an Arab Palestinian father after this date—whether inside Palestine or outside it—is a Palestinian" (cited in Massad 1995, 44). Therefore, Massad (1995, 45) continues that the land as a mother has been

'disqualified' of its 'reproductive role' after it was 'raped'. Consequently, "[w]ithin this metaphoric schema, women clearly cannot be agents of nationality. Their role, as a result, becomes secondary and supportive in the narrative of nationalism". In the same context, Ball (2012,44) contends that, there is a paradox in the nationalist narrative that while women may "symbolize the nation", men are the ones who "represent it".

In related research, Abdulhadi (1998) synthesizes that the image of Palestinian womanhood branches into three different yet interconnected roles. Firstly, there is the "superwoman", who is revered for her "martyrdom" and nurturing qualities. Secondly there is the "fertile mother" whose role is to contribute in the reproduction of the nation and advocate for larger families, preferably males. Lastly, there is the portrayal of women as a symbol of national pride.

## 2. Previous Studies

### 2.1 Extrapolating Palestinian Literature

Palestinian literature is intrinsically connected with Arabic literature which dates back to pre-Islamic period through Islamic times to modern period (Elad-Bouskila, 1999). In fact, many literary critics the likes of Gibran (2009) believe that Palestinian literature was subsumed within Arabic literature and was not acknowledged by prominent literary groups in Cairo and Beirut until the 1940s. Instead, it was seen as a subordinate and imitative form of literature. According to the Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani (2009, 3) "Palestinian literature, up to this tragic fall [the Nakba] had been part of the mainstream of the Arab literary movement which flourished during the first half of the century. It had its sources from and had been influenced by Egyptian, Syrian, and Lebanese writers who led the literary movement then".

Although Palestinian literature is an integral part of Arabic literature and has fully contributed to the experiences that Arabic literature has witnessed, it also exhibits distinct differences, particularly in its connection to place. Amit-Kochavi (2000,53) postulates that the "affiliation [of Palestinian literature] is national rather than territorial".

This shift in affiliation- from territorial to national- is a subsequence of the various phases that demarcated the Palestinian colonial experiences, ultimately leading to the establishment of the state of Israel in the aftermath of the 1948 War. Consequently, the convoluted history of Palestinians and their spatial shattering render Palestinian literature resistant to "conventional categorizations, canonizations, and periodizations" (Abu-Remaileh 2019, 22) that attempt to confine Palestinian literature within established frameworks of the broader term 'Arabic literature'.

Another peculiarity of Palestinian literature stems from the fact that the occupation of Palestine spurred a resistance movement that was not a voluntary decision, but rather a compelling need (Abu-Remaileh (Abu-Remaileh 2014). This has often placed Palestinian writing within the realm of "resistance literature" (adab al-muqawama), a genre that serves two purposes: "raising awareness" and countering "Zionist myths, claims, or accusations" (Abu-Remaileh 2014, 193).

In general, Palestinian literary expression has become a premeditated undertaking that is conscious of national concerns and that seeks to legitimize the Palestinian narrative against other counter narratives. Some critics even argue that a literary work cannot be considered a part of the Palestinian literary canon unless it adheres to the themes of nationalism, dismissing other works as "out of place productions" (Tahboub 2009, 181) whose authors are seen as detached from the political concerns of their people.

### 2.2 The Contributions of Women in Palestinian Literary Texts

Similar to the writings of women in many places around the world, the writings of women in the Arab world have faced neglect, misinterpretation, or marginalization (Shaaban 2009). This is due to the fact that the majority of Arab literary critics who are mostly males consider women's works "immature" (Naji 1989, 5) and often fail to explore the socio-political realities of their countries. Conversely, they confine women's literary works to subjects related to the household, such as romance, domesticity, matrimony, and offspring (Shaaban, 2009).

Consequently, novels authored by women have not yet been recognized as a component of mainstream Arabic literature (ibid, 8). Surprisingly, the research on the origins of the Arabic novel neglects to acknowledge any female novelists, despite their significant contributions to this literary genre (Koudur & Kiran 2018, 9). Several scholars contend that women played a pioneering role in the field of fiction writing. Some scholars credit Zaynab Fawwaz (1846–1914), a Lebanese modern Arab writer and feminist, with authoring the first Arabic novel (Shaaban, 2009; Zeidan, 1995; Koudur & Kiran, 2018).

However, according to Zeidan (1995), female pioneers of literature in the East did not have their own established tradition, but rather worked within existing male literary traditions. This was primarily due to the absence of preceding female literary figures. Consequently, they had to work within the confines of existing literary tradition, which involved conforming to and imitating the established norms (McLarny 2002). In fact, women who sought recognition had to adopt male literary conventions and to conceal feminist elements in their works (Cooke, 1996).

Despite the fact that Palestinian women's novels developed later than those of Arab women, they still followed the line of writing that typified the writings of pioneering Arab women writers. In fact, novels written by Palestinian women post-1948 exhibit similar themes and styles to those written by male writers during the same period (Gottesfeld 2011, 76). The year 1948, however, marks a milestone in the tradition of Palestinian women's literature as they began to publish after this period (Gottesfeld, 2011). Initially, their publications were

restricted to contributions in essays and radio and some modest achievements in short stories (Ashour, Ghazoul, & Reda-Mekdashy, 2008). Despite the fact that the writings of women in this period were marginalized, they have enabled feminist scholars to shift their focus away from prominent male reformers towards women who were active participants in shaping the new discourses on women (Abu Lughod, 1998). After the June 1967 war, however, "women's writing gained momentum" (Gottesfeld 2011, 77). In fact, this period is distinguished by feminized trends that had been encouraged by "self reliance and nurturing trends" (Sabbagh 1989, 62). This has in turn reflected on Palestinian women writings, who used their literary productions as a platform to contest the values of patriarchal discourse and as a conduit to women's liberation, which is a prerequisite to national liberation (Gottesfeld, 2011). Palestinian women's fiction underwent further development following the first Intifada (1987). During this period, women's literature had to adjust to the changing political landscape and effectively portray the events of that time. Authors achieved this by incorporating "slogans and stereotypes" into their texts, particularly since literature was being produced in "prisons and detention centers", with a strong focus on 'nationalism' as its central theme (Gottesfeld 2013, 23).

Later on, Palestinian women writers continued to reflect the social and political reality of Palestinian society in the events subsequent to the first Intifada ranging from the Oslo Accords to the Second Intifada and the 2008 war on Gaza (Yaseen, 2011; Gottesfeld, 2011). Similar to Gottesfeld (2013), Ahmad (2007) argues that Palestinian women novelists' fiction evolved through various phases and is a reflection of the political and female status of the different epochs of Palestinian history. She proposes that Palestinian women fiction writers pass through three developmental stages: the first stage is described as the early stage, which took place in the fifties and the sixties of the twentieth century and was marked by pioneering female writers. The second stage, which she calls the foundation stage, encompasses the seventies period, and finally, the maturity stage marks the eighties and the nineties.

In the maturity stage, female literary writers have become cognizant of the tension between national and feminist commitments and are, therefore, prompted to resist the symbolic silencing of women by openly confronting the repressive and allegorical practices that "reduce women to a signifier of nationalism" (Fayad 1995, 148). Fadwa Tuqan, an eminent Palestinian poet and a representative of Palestinian female writers' maturity stage, uses her writings to expose the atrocities of occupation and to advocate for the independence of Palestinian women. This independence is sought both from the relics of patriarchy, in which "women have to forget the existence of the word 'no' in Arabic" (1990, 40) and from the Israeli occupation.

Similarly, Sahar Khalifeh, a prominent Palestinian feminist fiction writer, verbalizes this rejection through the character of Nuzha in Bab As-Saha novel (1990): "Wake up, clever boy. I'm not the mother of the land or the symbol. I am a person. I eat, drink, dream, make mistakes, get lost, get agitated, suffer, and talk to the wind. I'm not a symbol, I'm a woman" (Khalifeh 1990, 167 as cited in Fayad 1995, 148).

### 2.3 Representation of Women in Palestinian Literature

Palestinian literature also plays a historic role in recording events in the lives of women. Thus, their portrayal in literature helps position their involvement in society in a given time period. In the context of the representation of women, Palestinian literature can be described as bildungsroman (a story of growth and development) concerning Palestinian women. It reflects the chronological, all-encompassing changes women have undergone, starting from the 1948 catastrophe through to the 1967 setback and return to the life of refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, and extending to the Uprising and the peace process period from 1987 onwards (Tahboub 2009, 182).

In other words, the representation of women in Palestinian literature has been deeply influenced by the historical epochs of the Palestinian chronicles and has fluctuated accordingly. In the early post-1948 period of Palestinian literature, the memories and experiences of Palestinian women are rarely present in the Palestinian literary canon (Sa'di & Abu Lughod, 2007). This could be linked to the claim that "both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2006, 87).

In fact, in early Palestinian literature, the depiction of women is often intertwined with themes of nationalism, honor, and motherhood. Tahboub (2009, 182) argues that the focus on themes of freedom and revolution by early Palestinian authors forestalled the integration of other themes. This dominance of the overarching theme of 'nationalism' led to the utilization of both male and female characters as instruments to further nationalist aspirations. Supporting this view, Olwan (2018, 66) asserts that "Palestinian nationalist discourse has promoted an idealized symbolic vision of women. In nationalist literature, heroes and heroines are depicted as national icons embodying and working for the national cause". Consequently, there has been a limited, if any, focus on gender and feminine-masculine struggles.

Even among Palestinian women writers in that era, there was a notable absence of awareness regarding gender disparities. Their literary output did not markedly depart from the prevailing literary norms that typified Arabic literature of the time. According to Gottesfeld (2013), these authors' narratives frequently adhered to established literary conventions, rather than presenting a controversial portrayal of the status of women, thus reinforcing preexisting gender paradigms in Arabic literature.

Numerous accounts in early literature, however, focus on the familial role of Palestinian women, often emphasizing and romanticizing these roles (Olwan 2018, 66) under the guise of "nurturing and raising future warriors" (Tahboub 2009, 182). Therefore, women who submit to traditional roles and remain confined in the domestic sphere become subordinate lackeys of men whose roles are contrapuntal to their male counterparts who are cast as leaders and battlefield soldiers.

Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that male involvement in armed conflicts signifies an essential aspect of "citizenship, ethnicity, and communal affiliation" (Daphna-Tekoah & Harel-Shalev 2017, 173). However, the contribution of women who are engaged in combat is

often overlooked and not regarded in the same manner (ibid). Early Palestinian narratives often focus on women's honor and attribute the displacement of families from active war zones and neighboring areas to fear of female rape and desecration of family honor (Humphries & Khalili 2007, 211).

In contemporary Palestinian literature, the image of women has transformed into an image of "the revolutionary comrade... reflecting women's entry into the public sphere" (Olwan 2018, 66) and the development of women's political and national consciousness. This transformation became more conspicuous after the Intifada during which Palestinian women increasingly participated in political activism and national resistance, disrupting the "traditional mold of women's role" (Farsoun 2004, 47).

As a result, women in the Palestinian society forged a distinct model of feminism that is compatible with the Palestinian nationalist project, asserting their gender identities could indeed coexist harmoniously with other subjectivities including national ideologies. Makkawi and Jaramillo (2005) similarly highlight the Intifada as pivotal moment in Palestinian women's literary experience as it led to a growing body of literature that depicted their struggles both under the yoke of occupation and as a result of the societal restraints.

#### *2.4 Gendering Palestinian Landscape in Literature*

According to Delaney (1995), women are often portrayed as icons and symbols of the nation whereas men are depicted as representatives of the state. This distinction is reflected in the masculine discourse as described by Ball (2012, 31) who refers to the "idealization of traditional femininity" in national narratives. This idealization extends to Palestinian literary expression, where the association of women with motherhood and productivity is a well-known trope. This depiction is in contrast with "assertion of masculine selfhood" found in Palestinian nationalist rhetoric that employs familial motifs. In these expressions, the male subject is portrayed in two ways: firstly, as the patriarchal "father", who is regarded as the protector, 'defender', and progenitor of the 'motherland'; and secondly, as a 'son of the soil', who is considered a native and the lawful heir to the land. His responsibility is to safeguard the 'mother' from any potential danger (Ball 2012, 31). Similarly, Tahboub (2009) emphasizes the iconization of motherhood in literature, portraying mothers not only as caretakers of flesh and blood, but also as symbolic figures representing the nation, the motherland, and the martyrs' mother.

This elasticity of the Palestinian mother's image is prominently displayed in the artistic works of renowned Palestinian novelists the likes of Ghassan Kanafani, as well as poets such as Samih Al-Qasim and Mahmoud Darwish. Zalman (2002, 17) contends that Kanafani's novels internally contemplate gender by constructing "new forms of masculinity" in relation to "national loss" and restoration. In Kanafani's novel *Umm Sa'd* (1969), for example, the novelist asserts that women serve as a national emblem of Palestine. Kanafani utilizes his primary female character, Umm Sa'd, to establish an anti-colonial or nationalist movement by employing the concept of the 'Nation-as-Mother'. This concept portrays the mother figure as responsible for birthing sons who are destined to engage in combat and, if required, sacrifice their lives for their homeland (Baaqeel 2019, 30). This portrayal positions Umm Sa'd (mother of Sa'd) as the "womb of the nation" (Tahboub 2009, 186) and an embodiment of a heroic maternal figure despite being passive in the national struggle. Her heroism stems directly from her reproductive role of giving birth to Sa'd and his brother and her ability to transcend her motherly instincts of fear for the lives of her children for the sake of the nation.

Similarly, in the poetry of Samih Al-Qasim, the cultural patriarchal discourse is underscored through the metaphorical use of motherhood to represent the land. This is evident in his poem "It Was and Shall Remain" (Kanat wa-Satabqa), where he exclaims, "Oh our mother the soil! Rejoice and be glad/ Your sons still protect your honour" (Al-Qasim 1991, 402 as cited in Hamzah 2009, 162). Likewise, in the works of the poet laureate Mahmoud Darwish "[t]he word 'mother' appears in all 206 times in his poems... [therefore,] the figure of the mother in Darwish's poetry take[s] on a number of different aspects, whose functions partially intersect with those it has in Palestinian literature in general" (Hamzah 2009, 164).

However, as Darwish evolves into Palestine's national poet and his poetry become more sophisticated, the masculine tone found in his early poetry is tuned. His poetry undergoes a transformation characterized by a "deconstruction of the masculinist rhetoric that simultaneously exalts, reduces and silences women" (Ball 2012, 36). In fact, in his poem "No More and No Less", Darwish adopts the voice of a woman revolting against the traditional metaphorical associations between land and womanhood as well as land and motherhood. He vehemently declares "I am not a land / or a journey / I am a woman, no more and no less".

This tension between national and feminist commitments also prompted female literary practitioners to resist the symbolic silencing of women and openly confront repressive and allegorical practices that "reduce women to a signifier of nationalism" (Fayad 1995, 148). Consequently, by rejecting the figurative representation of women, these literary practitioners refuse to relegate women's rights to the background. Instead, they empower women and encourage them to challenge traditional gender roles and nationalist expectations.

#### *2.5 Combating Male-driven narratives Following a Postcolonial Feminist Literary Approach to Palestinian Literature*

The inherent gendered nature of human experience is central to the radical implications posited by feminist theory. This recognition of the impact of gender and prioritization of the female experience has provided critical common ground for feminist theory and criticism (Jadoon, 2015). As a result, the retrieval and amplification of women's voices and experiences have emerged as central concerns within the feminist movement.

Since postcolonialism explores past and continuing oppression, it shares close affinities with feminist studies due to the analogous forms of domination by patriarchy and imperialism over perceived subordinates. As stated by Gandhi (1998, 83), both feminist and postcolonial theory originated from the desire to merely invert established "hierarchies of gender/culture/race" and they reject the dichotomous

oppositions that underpin the authority of patriarchy and colonialism. Due to their shared characteristics, the two fields have long been considered complementary. Nevertheless, it is only in recent times that these two independent endeavors have finally coalesced into the domain of postcolonial feminism (ibid).

The emerging field of postcolonial feminism represents a distinct strain of feminism that critiques both postcolonial theory and Western feminism. Whereas the former fails to account for gender issues and "the hegemonic power established by indigenous men after the Empire" (Al-wazedi 2020, 156), the latter tends to adopt a universalistic feminist framework that obscures rather than reveals the differences in the nature of patriarchal relations, thus limiting its scope to women in the Western world. This Eurocentric feminism overlooks the experiences of women living under imperial rule and belonging to diverse racial, cultural, social, and political backgrounds. Spivak (1981, 184) argues that there is an "inbuilt colonialism of First World feminism toward the Third". She points out that this is evident in the Western feminists' tendencies to universalize women's issues, displayed what she terms "colonial rescue fantasy" (ibid) in their approach to non-Western women. By the same token, Mohanty (1988, 51) critiques Western feminist scholarship for its tendency to universalize gender experiences and depict "the 'third world woman' as a singular monolithic subject". Mohanty also continues to contend that these representations are "based on a generalized notion of their subordination" (ibid).

Hence, the collision of feminist theory with postcolonial studies under the umbrella of postcolonial feminism contributes to the understanding of the overruling gender hierarchies in 'third world countries'. This approach enables scholars to interpret and communicate diverse feminist objectives and gendered experiences in ways that resist hegemonic assumptions rooted in Western perspectives (Ball 2012). Applied to Palestinian literature, a gender-conscious focus is instrumental in establishing alternative narratives that amplify the obliterated stories of females and illuminate their role in the struggle for independence. This is particularly important as their contributions are often erased or misinterpreted by dominant male-authored narratives (Tyagi, 2014). Therefore, the recovery of suppressed female narratives and voices within nationalist narratives has become a priority for Palestinian creative expression. This endeavor necessitates the integration of postcolonial and feminist efforts in order to address crucial gender and imperial issues that neither theory could adequately analyze independently (Ball, 2012).

#### *2.6 The Subaltern Can Speak: Literature as the Redeemer of Women*

The initial postcolonial paradigm operated under the assumption that all postcolonial works were written from a masculinist perspective and assumed a universal male subject (Jadoon 2015). This literary monopoly led to the underrepresentation of women, a major concern of feminist theorists in the postcolonial context. One of most notable feminists tackling this issue is Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). In her essay, Spivak (1988, 28) claims that "[a]s the object of colonialist historiography and as the subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant". Furthermore, within the framework of colonial production, the subaltern, particularly when female, faces additional marginalization due to a lack of historical representation and agency in self-expression. By remaining in "the shadow", Spivak claims that women become "gendered subalterns" who are treated as inferior within the patriarchal social order, with their choices rigorously controlled.

Women in the Arab world face similar challenges as subaltern females in postcolonial societies, striving to challenge their invisibility and silencing. Consequently, authors started to delve into intricate facets of womanhood and its connection to nationhood, specifically because there has been a lack of focus on the actual involvement of women in Arab/Muslim environments in passing down local histories (Sayigh 1998, 42). Similarly, the perspectives of Palestinian women have frequently been disregarded due to their perceived deviation from the dominant "official narrative", which typically refers to the narrative of the "national movement" primarily articulated by men (Yehya 2017, 97). This disregard has resulted in the suppression of women's narratives which is especially evident in the marginalization of the Palestinian women's stories in the documentation of oral testimonies related to the Nakba events (ibid). In fact, oral histories or testimonies by women were often absent, not only in the collective narrative but also in first-hand accounts of Palestinian experiences (Nashef 2021).

Hence Palestinians from various creative fields have sought to recover the narratives that have been silenced and marginalized by dominant masculine discourses through the medium of film, literature, art and criticism (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008). This attempt to restore Palestinian women's lost voices has transcended into a broader movement involving Arab women in the Middle East and the West, as well as non-Arab feminists, who have taken up the task of collecting the stories of Palestinian women. For the former this was a natural outgrowth of the development of women's studies in the region, while for the latter, it represented an effort to transcend national and cultural boundaries (Gluck 1990).

The accounts relayed by these writers have provided a platform for the silenced groups to voice their experiences and to uncover the harsh realities of the Israeli occupation and the patriarchal structures of the Palestinian community. For example, stories of rape and violation of Palestinian women's bodies by Israeli soldiers, previously deemed shameful and dishonorable, have been portrayed in fictionalized historical novels that were grounded in real events (Nashef, 2021). Despite the extensive evidence of expulsions, rape, and massacres in the 1980s found in Israeli archives, these documents were subsequently "reclassified and researchers were denied access" (Anziska 2019, 66). This action effectively concealed the responsibility of the Israeli military for these heinous acts.

Therefore, Palestinian writers have actively sought to expose the aggressors through various mediums such as articles, history books and novels in order to challenge the suppressed Palestinian female narratives such as sexual assault and rape as well as massacres that remain concealed in Israeli archives. Amongst the recent novels and prominent feminist voices are those of Susan Abulhawa and Radwa Ashour who have authored the novels *Between Sky and Water* (2015) and *The Woman from Tantoura: A Novel of Palestine* (Arabic 2010, English

2014), respectively. Both Abulhawa and Ashour employ fictionalized narratives through which female protagonists unveil the atrocities and sexual assaults that have been inflicted on them by the Israeli forces, thereby establishing a connection between "the violation of the family sanctuary to that of the nation" (Branche et al., 2012, 10). These novels seek to empower women by providing them with a platform to share their stories within the same nationalistic framework that previously suppressed their voices. In doing so, they redeem women from the relics of patriarchy and the tyranny of the Israeli forces, ultimately forging an alternative path of intellectual resistance.

### 3. Conclusion

Reviewing some of the prominent literature on Palestinian women and their contributions to both the national and literary movement in Palestine, our effort aimed to identify some of gaps in existing scholarly discourse. The significant gap observed in the literature is the portrayal of nationalism and feminism as internally contradictory. In the Palestinian national and literary canons which are mainly male-dominant, the presence of Palestinian women is vague, either symbolically linked to the homeland, or confined to their roles as biological producers of the nation. However, the persistent political turmoil and the ongoing national struggle provided a catalyst for the growth of Palestinian women's gender consciousness and eventually feminism.

This amalgamation of Palestinian nationalism and feminism formed an organic unity, wherein the fulfilment of one aspect necessitated the existence and progression of the other. This elevated sense of the female self-awareness and the coexistence of the nationalist and feminist projects was reflected in the works of Palestinian women literary writers. Through their works, these writers, sought to challenge the dissonance between the images of women in literature and reality. Their writings clarified that this juxtaposition is the result of a primarily male literary establishment, against the backdrop of a predominantly male-led nationalist movement.

By rejecting metaphorical and reductive representation of women, female literary practitioners refrain from relegating women's rights to the background. They encouraged women to fight against traditional expectations related to gender and nationalism. In this sense, women's writings question and subvert power structures through the mediation of a national agenda, thus utilizing Palestinian national aspirations as a protective framework for advancing feminist objectives.

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### Authors contributions

Samah Jarrad was responsible for drafting the manuscript, Dr. Raihanah M. M. was responsible for study design and the numerous revisions, and Dr. Ravichandran Vengadasamy conducted the final revision of the paper. The authors collectively read and approved the final manuscript.

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