

“Greater Than the Sum of Our Parts”: Feminism Inter/Nationalism and Palestine

A Book Review

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Interestingly this work by Nada Elia – Greater Than the Sum of Our Parts – takes off from what the last book I read on Palestine discussed as images of Palestine and the imagination arriving with that. The first image used here is that of a political cartoonist Naji al-Ali and his creation of Handala – named after the native bitter gourd fruit – forever ten years old, never exposing his face to the viewer – “To be a refugee is...a bitter experience.” The second image is the most significant for Palestinians – the house keys they took with them when forced into exile, into refugee status.

From that introduction she quickly introduces the concept of her title, the intersection of feminism, settler-colonialism, state-sanctioned violence, resistance to imperialism and the need to go beyond the truth of apartheid and the BDS movement to say “Zionism itself must be abolished....it cannot be reformed.”

The first chapter, “Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Resistance from Palestine to Turtle Island” reiterates the last idea, “the movement [Zionism] is...a European colonial project, which gradually evolved to become more generally “Western” imperial project, sustained by the USA.” From there Elia develops the inter/connections between the indigenous people of

Turtle Island (North America), Black Lives Matter, and other groups protesting alongside Palestinians.

In a subsection “Colonialism” a short, accurate precis of the history of Zionist thought provides a strong background to her arguments regardless of any previous awareness of the Zionist narrative – or lack thereof. With references mostly to Ze’ev Jabotinsky and including Benny Morris and a few contemporary U.S. Israeli advocates, she concludes it is not just a question of decolonization, but “It is resistance to imperialism, colonialism, and oppression, not “terrorism,” nor anti-Jewish hatred.”

In “Déjà Vu” comparisons with South African apartheid are made, partly to show similarities and differences but also to show the intersection of other ideas. Discriminatory citizenship laws, voting and political representation, the “whataboutism” (where Israel/white South Africa complain about unfair treatment) of the Israeli narrative, and the patriarchal non-democratic reign of Mahmoud Abbas outlines her argument that “these discriminatory laws that impact families as one of the many reasons that abolishing the Zionist system is a feminist issue.”

That idea is further developed in “Social and Political Liberation: No Free Homeland Without Free Women and Queers” which she opens with “Palestine is a feminist issue,” an idea she summarizes with,

“...today progressive women of colour and Indigenous women, along with anti-imperialist, anti-racist white women, are firmly anti-Zionist, understanding that no ideology that hinges on supremacy and discrimination is reconcilable with feminism.”

Discussing the “Demographic Threat” Elia shows the role of Palestinian women and the restrictive burdens they carry ranging from rape to lack of medical assistance with pregnancy and child birth. The patriarchy and oppression under capitalism is introduced as being “one of the interlocking systems of oppression.” Honor killings – femicide – and Israel’s superficial openness to gay culture – pinkwashing – are presented as other facets of the overall struggle for liberation.

One of the more important elements of colonialism and capitalism is land. In the early 1980s – as a side note – the Canadian Film Board had an excellent documentary on indigenous land claims called “The land is the culture”. It very critically saw that the land and all that lived on it, all its resources, was the basis for the culture of B.C. natives, and indeed, all indigenous people – not surprisingly it has long disappeared from NFB listings on the internet.

Elia understands, as do most indigenous people, the truth of the land being the culture,

“The land acknowledgements that are now routine among liberals in the USA and Canada are worthless when they are not accompanied by land restitution.”

Police as property protectors (and slave protectors), as protectors against labor protests, creates a system of violence over the people to protect land ownership by the settler-colonialists. Dead buffalo and “public property” are part of this, the latter indicating the land is no longer indigenous, but owned by the colonial government. Water, forestry, agriculture and food all become part of apartheid.

While discussing food apartheid and its critical role on women’s lives, Elia chastises –

correctly – white liberal women for their feminism, providing the definition that does not fit the normal western narrative,

“Feminism [is] “ a broad political strategy of structural transformation because violence and inequality are structural problems.

Food sovereignty...unlike food security, involves questions of culture, power, identity, ecology, and land.

“...where the settlers have tried to impose human and agricultural monocultures, the Indigenous have responded with their insistence on biodiversity as essential for survival.”

“A global intifada” covers a wide range of topics: the arms industry, militarization of the police, security training, and global awareness of societal violence (partly via BLM and Red Nation Collective) is creating a global intifada of anticolonial sentiment and reaction.

In her final “Pledge – Feminsim is a Palestinian Issue” she argues that “in contrast to liberal feminist traditions in the US that continue to weaponize feminist discourse against Palestinians...by failing to confront the structural forms of gendered and sexual violence inherent to colonial-settlerism, imperialist wars, racial capitalism and global white superemacy.”

“Greater Than the Sum of Our Parts” is a clearly written, instructive, and critical examination of society in general as it affects the apartheid and Zionist structures in Palestine. It provides a unique view into the problems of Palestine and the resourcefulness of the indigenous people, feminists, and the LGBTQ community globally in the struggle against white racism, capitalism, and colonial-settlerism and their many effects on society.

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