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Women's resistance, femicide, and 'dead without dying' in Palestine

An interview with Dr Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian

Anne de Jong

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Abstract

Dr Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian is a feminist, Palestinian professor at the Hebrew University in East Jerusalem. Drawing on her practises as a social worker for vulnerable Palestinian women, she passionately advocates that critical scholarship should attentively listen to the personal stories of women and girls. For *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, she spoke about often unnoticed and unclassified acts of women's resistance in Palestine. On the far-reaching consequences of Israel's practise of house demolition and on why this cannot be understood without looking at Zionist ongoing dispossession of Palestinians. By eloquently moving from the very personal to the political and from the very local to the global, Dr Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian puts forward a critical analysis of Palestinian women's experiences under Israeli settler colonialism.

Keywords: Palestine, Zionism, women's resistance, Feminism Middle East, Femicide

Born in Haifa in 1961, in the period between the Nakba and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, it was not to be expected that Dr Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian would become the renowned feminist scholar and dedicated practitioner that she is today. After finishing her bachelor degree in political science and philosophy at the tender age of nineteen, Nadera married and moved to Jerusalem. Inspired by an article recounting a conversation between Kant and Hegel, and sparked by her fascination, she became determined to deepen her knowledge of philosophical analyses of law. Being a woman, however, her family deemed her too soft to become a lawyer and encouraged her to become a social worker instead.

Backed by a master degree in social work, Shalhoub-Kevorkian did work as a therapist for battered women but soon realised that the individual cases of abuse could not be understood or adequately addressed without looking at the wider system of oppression. At the Hebrew University in annexed East-Jerusalem, she thus pursued her PhD in Law with the aim to use this knowledge to challenge such underlying structures of domination within the Israeli-Palestinian context.

Soon after earning her doctor degree, however, she came to understand that neither law nor mere social work could adequately intervene in the lives of vulnerable women. Coming full circle, she consciously returned to her political philosophy background to become the interdisciplinary scholar and practitioner that characterises her work today. Combining her different degrees as well as professional and personal experiences, Dr Shalhoub-Kevorkian takes her critical scholarship outside the ivory tower of the academy into the power-imbued field of personal experiences. She installed the first emergency hotline for women in the Middle East and continues her work as an engaged therapist.

In May, Dr Shalhoub-Kevorkian visited the Netherlands as part of the Palestine Link¹ yearly college tour where she delivered the key note address "Palestinian women and Israel's settler colonialism: The case of occupied East Jerusalem". For *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, anthropologist Anne de Jong, working on Palestinian women's experiences herself, spoke to Dr Shalhoub-Kevorkian about the importance of personal stories, women's voices, feminist research, and the critical intersect between academia and activism.

Thank you for being here and thank you for agreeing to this interview. In your latest book, you really bring women's experiences and women's resistance to the forefront. This is an aspect of the Israel-Palestine conflict that is often overlooked and given scarce attention in popular media as well as academia. Why do you think that women's resistance is often overlooked?

I think the kind of resistance that women participate in is usually unseen, undefined, and not recognised as resistance. For example, in my study on house demolition in East Jerusalem and the effects of this particular aspect of settler colonial oppression, it quickly became clear to me that families who had just lost their home were approached by social workers or researchers with a solely legal discourse. Who owned the home, what was built legally or illegally, and is this case a violation of human rights? This is all about human rights, the *huwoman* rights are not there. The experience of women is not acknowledged. And if I then say that we should pay

attention to the devastating effects of losing a home for women, they tell me that I am domesticating women. That feminists have fought for years to liberate women from being domesticated by the home. That may be so but it overlooks the fact that you need to have a home. You need to have a bed to sleep in, walls to give you a space and provide comfort to you. For women in Palestine to lose their home is major and you cannot ignore the particular effects of home demolitions on women and girls.

When you speak specifically to women they will tell you about the demolition before the demolition, the demolition during the demolition and the demolition after the demolition. Before the actual demolition they speak about fear. The fact that they needed to sleep in their clothes for months or even for years because the Israelis could come in the middle of the night with bulldozers, police, and dogs to drag families out of the house without any notice. Women talk about the bureaucracy of occupation. About the amount of money they paid in order to try to keep the house. If a house is under threat of being demolished, who is going to the municipality to negotiate? Who speaks to lawyers or who asks the engineers to look at the maps? It is women. When families receive a demolition order, men do not speak about it out of fear or maybe shame. Only women can navigate this traumatic bureaucracy. If you speak to those women, you hear about the money they paid for the demolition of their own home. Or how they are forced to do it themselves because if Israel carries out the demolition the bill of the bulldozers is sent to these families. That is 75000 shekel [15000 euro] and women are then indirectly forced to do it themselves, to demolish their own home, so that at least they do not have to pay for the machines that destroy their homes. You need to understand that women are exposed to the public sphere when they are protecting the very private.

And one should also listen to girls. For example, I was at the home of a family in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Silwan. The situation was very tense, they received a demolition order and the family was constantly physically attacked by their Israeli neighbours who tried to hurt and intimidate them in order to drive them out of the house. I was talking to the mother of the family in the courtyard when a little note, folded in the shape of a home, was thrown at us from over a wall. On it a plea was written from maybe nine or ten year old girls asking for international NGOs to help them keep their homes. It was signed *Banat el harem* – girls of the neighbourhood. This is telling me 'you are talking to our mothers but we are also here. We are young girls and we don't want to lose our home'. Now tell me, is that not resistance?

Another girl, Ra'ab, drew me a picture of her family after their home was demolished. It was a nice drawing of her mother, her siblings, and herself but she did not include her father. When I asked her why, she told me that he was not her father because he had not done anything. She needed him to cry or do something but he just stood by and smoked a cigarette while their house was being flattened. You cannot just look at the legal aspects of house demolitions through a human rights lens. You have to include these stories about fear, the bureaucracy, about costs, about the emasculation of men, and the plea of young girls. When looking at female resistance in Palestine, you have to take into account not only the resistance that is voiced and defined as such, but also the resistance that is unvoiced and not recognised.

Within your work, and also in your above answer, you use examples of very personal stories to explain the theories and concepts that you put forward. Is this a conscious decision? A deliberate choice in conducting gendered or feminist research?

Yes, for me gendered research means attentively listening to the stories of women and girls. Feminist research, then, should take place on a personal or intervention level as well as a theoretical level. Intervention means that we should not only take the stories after the demolition happened but also practically intervene before and during because that allows us to see what is not seen and hear what is not heard.

As a social worker, for example, I organised group therapy for mothers of martyrs. Each week, a group of fifteen women would come together to talk and share their personal experiences. There was one woman, Imm Riyad, who came every week and listened to everyone but never spoke herself. Until one week, I asked what they do with the pain, what they do when they miss their sons? Imm Riyad spoke for the first time and said "I will tell you but don't tell anyone. There is a hallway in my house that goes between my room and Riyad's room and when Riyad was still alive we put the tiles there together. Each morning around 3:30, I wake up, I put my cheek on those tiles and tell Riyad that I miss him." That is not recognised as resistance but it is Imm Riyad's way of resistance. Her way to stay strong. As a therapist, I can tell you that at that moment I could not talk but just cried. And even now, after eight years of telling this story, I still cry.

Feminist research is about trying to understand women surviving the Israeli machinery of oppression in their own ways. It is attentiveness to detail, to the individual, and the small acts in the everyday. Feminist research needs that attentiveness because settler colonial oppression attacks

those acts of the everyday. This kind of research also raises theoretical and methodological questions because one must place these stories of the private and everyday into the historical context of settler colonialism.

The story of Imm Riyad really did not begin with the death of her son. It began in 1948 with the *Nakba*, with the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. If you look at the house demolitions, it is a continuation. A woman was first evicted from Haifa in 1948. Then she was not wanted in Jerusalem because she was classified a 'present absentee'² and then, after living in her home for forty years, she was evicted yet again. This is her story and you need to listen to it. But you also need to see the ongoing *Nakba* in it, because it is deeply political. The *Nakba* is not one event of destruction that happened a long time ago. Everything that is happening today in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem, in Gaza, and in '48 [Israel "proper"], the entire condition of Palestine is a continuation of dispossession, of destruction, of *Nakba*. You cannot understand where we are standing today without looking at the history and, if you do not include the ongoing *Nakba* in every analysis, you are not a feminist to me.

Critical or feminist research should then be attentive to personal stories but make sure that these are always placed within a broader socio-historical context?

And within the political context, not merely a cultural context. This is crucial to understand because, if you only look at so called "cultural aspects", you ignore that it is a structured system of oppression. The Zionist reality of today is a structure of violence that is embedded in an ideology of elimination. It is a system that turns the native into an invader and a system through which the settler indigenises himself. Feminist research should place the everyday within the historical and contemporary context of this system of oppression.

If one merely looks at the current situation from a culture perspective it becomes ahistorical, apolitical, and actually plays into processes of othering and orientalism. One cannot just look at what happened today in Hebron or Jerusalem because it is a structure. It is our condition and the politics of naming should not be ignored within that condition.

Here you bring up another central theme within your work, the politics of naming and how certain concepts reflect or create certain misconceptions about day-to-day life of Palestinians. Could you elaborate on this?

The power of naming is major within the Middle Eastern context. For example, if we speak about honour killing, we should acknowledge that

this is not a Palestinian or Arab concept. It dates back to the Napoleon Code of 1804. This so called “crimes of passion” code is a colonial code, not an Arab code. To culturalise it means to make it all about men’s honour. As a feminist, activist, and therapist I try to challenge this naming because it is not about men’s honour but about the killing of women. In the West, they call it crimes of passion. In Israel, they call it domestic crimes. In Arab countries, but also in countries such as Brazil, they call it honour crimes but there is no honour, no passion, or romance in the killing of women. It is a crime, it is homicide and that is why I call it ‘femicide’.

After collecting data from 1997 to 2000, I put the concept of ‘femicide’ on the table because the outcome of the analysis surprised me.³ Of the 334 cases of women killings that were registered in that period, 211 were officially classified as *khada e wakhadar*, which means ‘faith and destiny’. Faith and destiny is not even a legal category. It means ‘she fell from a balcony’ ‘or ‘she had an accident and was burned’ as if it was just an unfortunate event. It was not classified as the murder of a woman even though that is what it is. These are not unfortunate accidents, they are murder, they are femicide. They are not about honour or passion, or romance, it is about women being killed. My work then is about challenging patriarchal definitions that are accepted and integrated into our legal systems. Which concurrently are accepted within a social system and that are then ascribed to “our culture”. But they are not part of our culture and no father or brother who kills a mother or a sister can be called an honourable man. If anything, these are unhonoured crimes and we should call it ‘femicide’ to step away from the inaccurate, culturalised notion of the killing of women and girls.

The politics and power of such naming is really crucial and should thus be at the forefront of any feminist research in the Middle East. Medical and legal definitions should be challenged. In “Reexamining femicide: Breaking the silence and crossing “scientific” borders” (2003), for example, I show that, in Palestine, you don’t need to die in order to be dead. If the law imposes on a thirteen or fourteen year old girl who was raped to marry her rapist in order to so-called save the family honour, then this is death without dying. That girl is dying every day and thus you do not need to die in order to die. The medical and legal definition of death is not acceptable to me in this case. The same goes for virginity testing, which I argue can be a licence to kill⁴. Legally, you only need a report from a doctor that there was penetration. In some situations, however, this piece of paper can be a licence for her father or brother to kill her. One needs to be extremely careful and sensitive in developing legal technology and procedures be-

cause it can easily reproduce patriarchy. Giving more power to fathers and brothers. To men. There are so many questions that need to be asked and naming, definitions, and the power of words to reproduce femicide, patriarchy, and other structural systems of oppression should be taken into consideration.

In 2008 you wrote the article "The gendered nature of education under siege: A Palestinian feminist perspective" (International Journal of Lifelong Education Vol. 27(2)) in which you challenge the concept of education as neutral or separated from the politics of the state. Could you elaborate on how analysis of education in the Palestinian territories lack a gendered perspective?

Well, for example, the Palestinian ministry of Education publishes reports showing all the statistics of school attendance in the different West Bank areas. In 2008-2009, they reported on a high rise in school drop-outs in Area C⁵. One such area is Abu Deis, a Palestinian town on the border between the Jerusalem governorate and the West Bank. There is a school near the town, which the girls of the town attended. They used to walk to school and loved it. As soon as Israel built the Wall, however, the girls needed to take a bus circling the Wall via a checkpoint. After that, there was a huge drop in girls attending primary school in the Abu Deis area and it was said that this was due to 'cultural issues' with girls' education. But one should not ignore the socio-economic and political implications in girls' education. There is dire poverty and even though this bus ride only costs a few shekels a day, this might be too much for some families to spare. Mothers may not want to expose their daughters to the harassment of the soldiers at the checkpoint every day. For their schoolbags to be searched, for them to wait, for their daughters to be cursed at, or exposed to this raw form of control.

You cannot call this school drop-out. Drop-out has the connotation of girls who do not want to go to school. That some young girl quit school because she wants to smoke hash or something. Calling it school drop-outs is extremely problematic because what is going on is deprivation of education. One should look at the data but to understand it one should place it squarely within its political context and be very aware of the power of naming in both revealing and exposing the situation of girls and women. And in this way, through careful examination of words and real, everyday stories and combining the personal and the political, you can start challenging Zionism. Start challenging the abuse of power by those in power and expose the hegemonic power holders. This is a struggle. And one needs to

realise that you need to work on two levels. You need to look at individual needs and stories but you also need to work on the political level.

You started your own education with a bachelor degree in political philosophy, then moved on to a master in social work and finally obtained your Ph.D. at the Law faculty of the Hebrew university. While 'interdisciplinary' seems to be a buzzword within contemporary universities, you seem to be one of the rare scholars who truly does integrate and combine the insights and methods of different disciplines. Even more so, you use your experiences as a therapist working with vulnerable Palestinian women within your academic analysis. Would you say that this interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary approach is a conscious decision and would you recommend it to other scholars?

Absolutely. I very consciously move between political philosophy, between being a therapist, a feminist, a law scholar, to being a Palestinian mother myself, to critical studies, to the personal stories of women and girls. I believe it is not only allowed to combine different disciplinary perspectives with personal experience and personal stories, but that it is necessary for any critical research. In the book I am working on now, I also try to combine all those things and move from the very local to the very global. I put forward an analysis built on the idea of the physics of power. In physics, it is clear that if I move a tread here, it will move over there. Now we need to prevent it from moving here in order to allow the people on the other to live as well. What you see in the Palestinian case is that Zionism came, dispossessed land, displaced people, caused so much poverty, so much fragmentation of the family. This is geopolitical and it was geopolitically supported. The denial of the international community of Palestinian existence, the denial of the Nakba as major to Palestinian experience also affects our behaviour today. Confusion, uncertainty, fear, the power of the Israeli lobby, it is silencing and it is continuous. In 1993 and 1994, I was involved in setting up the model parliament for Palestine, proposing new laws and writing the first attempt of a Palestinian constitution. What happened is that Oslo came⁶, that Israel continued dispossession of the land, building settlements, kicking people out, erasing Palestinian existence. This continuous violence of settler colonialism, which is embedded in the Israeli system, ruins all our efforts. There is a need to look at the physics of power of the past and the present.

If, for example, you click at Google maps, you see everybody but you do not see Palestinians. Why? Do we not exist, are we unknown, are we waste? We are living. We are living entities in Lebanon, in Jordan, in

Syria, in Palestine. We are here, but we do not exist on Google maps. We are invisible on the Google map. How come? These are questions that should be asked because the production of knowledge about us is controlled by those in power. By the hegemony, and that is why a scholar like me is writing and challenging these systems of oppression. That Google map does not show Palestine is telling a million stories. It tells us that you are not counted, that you are not wanted, you are not cared for, and you will never get support. You are not there, you are the 'unpeople'. That is why I start my work with the question, what is settler colonialism? Where does it come from and how is it connected to Israel's biblical claim to the land and the myth of 'a land without people for a people without land'. It was not like we were not there. Palestinians were there, we existed, but it is like we were not people. Today, we are still not classified as human. The Balfour declaration states clearly that the land should be given to the Jews and that the people in the land should not be consulted. But who cares? Yet this history is not in the past, it determines and shapes Palestinian lives and deaths today. Combined with the security analogy, through which Israel claims that all its actions are self-defence, this system controls the Palestinian body to the extreme.

It is very clear that you perceive this total control over the body to be a continuation of ongoing Zionist discourse and practises of dispossession of Palestinians. To what extent does Israel still control Palestinian bodies today? Fully and in every aspect of life. Even in death. And this ties in to the story I began with. About the house demolitions and Israeli control over the very private. Israel is in my home, in my bedroom, trying to control who I love, who I marry, how many children I have, and finally, in the last instance, about my dead body. It is the symbolic death of inhuman conditions and treatment – the laws and rules that deem a living person not living or death without dying – but also literally the politics of control over dead bodies. The story of my neighbour's wife is a tragic example. One normal morning, I went to work and, on my way back home, I picked up my husband from his clinic. When we arrived at our street, the entire building was lit and our neighbour came to us in huge distress. His wife had died and worse, at the time she passed away she had been visiting her mother in Beit Jala. Now, Beit Jala is on the other side of the Wall. We were in Jerusalem and the dead body of our neighbour's wife was in Beit Jala. Israel informed our neighbour that they would not allow him to bring the body of his wife back to Jerusalem. He cried terribly, shouting that Jerusalem is her place, that this is her soil, her home. What did he have to tell their

daughters? That he left the body of their mother behind? So, we intervened and took our car passed the checkpoint to Beit Jala. We took her body and put it in the back seat, sitting up with a seat belt. A dead body sitting up and we crossed the checkpoint without being stopped at one a.m. at night to bring her home. We buried her the next day, but tell me now why Israel won't allow a dead body to be brought home for a funeral? Tell me why, because it is certainly not security. Well, the reason is that this is settler-colonialism. Even the eviction of a dead body cannot be allowed because it would post mortem grand this Palestinian woman human status, which is denied to her in life as well as death.

So again, we see how the very personal story of death, of a dead body, is tied to into the political. How we cannot disconnect this from the broader context, because then the story is still there but the meaning gets lost. And that, I think, is where feminist scholars come in. They should ask the questions. They should challenge what is taken for granted, the hegemonic thought of what is going on in Israel and Palestine. They should approach the Nakba as a verb, as an ongoing process of dispossession stemming directly from settler-colonialism. They should connect the local to the global, the visible with the invisible, and the very private to the political system of oppression. This is how I see my work and this is how I see a feminist perspective benefitting women lives in Palestine.

Now, don't get me wrong. This is not as easy as it sounds. Asking those questions and challenging authority is hard and you will be challenged yourself. They will turn it around and question your morality. But still it needs to be done. Decontextualising everything that is going on and thus not asking central questions of power is not an option for a feminist scholar or for any serious scholar.⁷

Notes

1. <http://www.palestinelink.nl/palestina/boeken-en-filmtips/artikelen/>
2. Present Absentee is an Israeli legal term that refers to Palestinians who were, voluntarily or not, internally displaced and thereafter refused to return to their previous homes. They are present within Israel but are denied full rights of ownership or presence.
3. See Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2002)
4. See Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005)
5. The Oslo Accords divided the West Bank into area A, B and C. Area A is officially fully under Palestinian control and jurisdiction. Area B falls under Palestinian civil but Israeli security jurisdiction. Area C remained fully under Israeli civil and security control.
6. Dr Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian refers to the Oslo Accords signed in 1995 between Yasser Arafat as representative of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and the gov-

ernment of Israel. While the Oslo Accords are often depicted as a peace treaty, it merely entailed an agreement on a peace process that, on paper, should lead to the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian State. Despite this ambitious objective, Israel continued settlement expansion and the implementation of steps towards an independent Palestine never materialised.

7. Due to the precarious situation of Palestinian scholars employed within Israeli universities, Dr Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian declined to respond to my final question regarding her position towards the academic boycott. She did refer readers interested in the topic to the online journal *Feminists @ Law's* special issue on 'Why BDS is a feminist issue': <http://journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/feministsatlaw/issue/current>

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About the Author

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