

# Oral History and Dual Marginalization: Palestinian Peasant Women and Nakba Narratives

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Why are so many oral narratives of the Nakba almost identical? Are there voices that are marginalized and experiences that are suppressed? How can we understand a Palestinian peasant woman who explains that her life became better after the Nakba? These are some of the questions that I probed when exploring oral history in Palestine and in paying close attention to the narratives of Palestinian women from the village of Mughallis.<sup>1</sup> Ted Swedenburg identifies three distinctive qualities of Palestinian history-making and of oral history in particular. These are its fragmentation, loss, and “suppression.”<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I examine “suppression” and its effects on the trajectory of Palestinian oral history. I begin with the Nakba as an event grounding Palestinian collective consciousness, probing it through one of the most marginalized sectors of Palestinian society: peasant women.

Palestinian researchers have contrasting approaches with regard to the value given written and oral testimonies: some adhere to classical conceptions of historical research, its documentary evidence, and methods of adjudicating the accuracy of this evidence; others may approach oral history with a bias toward a certain narrative and are on the lookout for supporting testimonies, while some researchers deploy multiple methodologies.<sup>3</sup> All of these considerations are weighed within a research environment dominated by what I term the dominant ideology of national commitment.<sup>4</sup> This general ideology – which is concerned with the preservation of the Palestinian identity and traditional social values, and emphasizes the unity of the Palestinian people and their struggle to end colonialism – is manifested in literary and artistic works, in the public discourse concerning

the nation, and even in the modes of expressing joy and sorrow among other simple daily actions. In this study, I read the dominant ideology of national commitment through the writings and studies of those who conform to it as well as to those who dissent from it. I opt for the term “ideology of national commitment” as a more comprehensive concept than the “ideology of national liberation,” which has been deployed by other scholars to describe the dominant ideology in the Palestinian political sphere post-1967 and the eruption of the Palestinian intifada.<sup>5</sup>

While the emergence of the ideology of state building diluted the intensity and dominance of the ideology of national commitment, it did not eradicate it, and its presence is still strongly felt today. Often there is a negotiation between the two ideologies. During times of intense confrontation with the occupation forces, the ideology of national commitment re-assumes its dominance, shaping the choices of scholars – whether they are aware of it or not. As such, undertaking a study and critique of the ideology of national commitment is a thorny matter, and I have hesitated numerous times before putting forth some of the ideas in this study.

## **Early Concerns with Palestine’s Oral History**

Examining the introduction of oral history to historical and social research in Palestine during the late 1960s and through the 1970s allows for probing into several areas, including the individual nature of historical research during that period, most of which was initially undertaken for doctoral and master’s theses. For example, Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hout wrote her doctoral thesis on the Palestinian political leadership during the Mandate period, Nafez Nazzal collected oral interviews with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon to write his doctoral thesis on Palestinian refugees from Galilee, and Rosemary Sayigh and Julie Peteet used oral history narratives to understand the conditions of refugees in Lebanon.<sup>6</sup> Sayigh’s work had a significant impact on the interest in Palestinian memory as an important source for historical writing, while both Sayigh and Peteet drew attention to the importance of oral history from a feminist point of view.<sup>7</sup>

Sayigh’s work with refugee women in Lebanon clearly highlights women’s critical voices and their role in telling narratives that differ from the official ones.<sup>8</sup> This divergence from the official narrative can take several forms: women’s narratives could agree with the official narrative on a different level or from a different perspective or it could undermine the official narrative or completely disagree with it. It is also important to point out that the official history refers to the national movement narrative, which was a narrative mostly told by males, as Sayigh sees it. It is clear that the questions raised by Sayigh’s work have clearly influenced views on oral history, so that it is not considered merely a complement to traditional written history. Here, I raise questions about the ideological hegemony that is prevalent nationally in oral history, as well as in the practices of gathering oral narratives, and discuss how sometimes trying to get narratives of the marginalized, leaves in place other kinds of marginalization.

Oral history as a methodology for research on Palestine was introduced relatively

early, considering that oral history first emerged in the United States in the 1930s before spreading elsewhere. During the 1960s, it became recognized as a significant method for the production of history and, in some areas, as important as other branches of historical knowledge. However, certain critical perceptions considered its benefits limited to research in anthropology and folklore and did not consider oral testimony as reliable as testimonies and evidence present in written documents produced in the same period as events under historical investigation.<sup>9</sup> In the Palestinian case, resorting to oral history was considered a second or even third alternative to carrying out archival or text-based historical research.<sup>10</sup> This is evident in the effort that researchers put forth to justify theoretically their adoption of oral history as a methodology and oral testimony as a source of information. Whether implicitly or explicitly, these justifications referenced the lack of access to archival evidence and documents typically used in traditional historical writing has forced researchers to find alternative sources in order to fill this gap.<sup>11</sup> The emerging disciple of Palestinian oral history was also driven by ideological and epistemological motives, including “the documentation of events and creating a living memory for future generations”; “fear of losing the Palestinian narrative”; “sympathy with the Palestinian people”; and showing “deference and loyalty to the victims’ accounts.”<sup>12</sup>

These non-academic or purely epistemic motives are highly consistent with the “ideology of national commitment.” In addition, social or historical research that aimed to support and consolidate the Palestinian narrative and Palestinians’ rights was clearly celebrated. Historical research was often viewed as part of the struggle to preserve and perpetuate the Palestinian narrative, particularly since the Nakba, a landmark in the history and collective consciousness of the Palestinian people and undoubtedly the main event attended to by Palestinian oral history.<sup>13</sup> In relation to this contribution, the main characteristics of oral history of the Nakba include: prioritizing documentation of the crimes committed by the Zionist movement during the ethnic cleansing of villages and cities and their conquest following the displacement of their residents; gathering testimonies of the Nakba as a historical event, as well as documenting the lives of Palestinians before it, without any interest in individual accounts or the meaning of these periods and events for those interviewed or the Nakba’s relation to interviewees’ views of their own cause; and unifying the Palestinian narrative of the Nakba as the main tragic event, which created a rift in Palestinian history and collective memory, as well as Palestinian urban modernity, and seeking to restore an “image” of pre-Nakba life. I offer a case study below to expand these aims – and as a counterpoint and challenge to some of them.

## **The Nakba and the Shift in Power Relations and Social Positions**

This contribution and its central argument began after a lengthy interview with S.A., a woman displaced from the village of Mughallis on 9 July 1948.<sup>14</sup> She moved with her family to Hebron, where her father worked to provide housing, as he refused to live in the al-‘Arrub camp. She got married and started a family in Hebron, and today she lives in

Ramallah. S.A. has a strong personality and memory, and holds a position of prestige in her family, despite living as a woman from one of Palestine's most conservative areas in terms of social conduct.<sup>15</sup> S.A.'s perception of the Nakba was remarkably different from the prevailing general perception in Palestine. This was mainly based on her life with her family before and after the Nakba. For her, the Nakba was a central "event" that marked the separation between two different paths in her life, the latter of which she considered preferable to the former. Despite seeming "out of step" with the generally held view of life before and after the Nakba, S.A.'s testimony and perception of her life and family is shared with many other women refugees, who experienced marginalization to different degrees. S.A.'s oral testimony may indicate that her perception of the Nakba is largely similar to that held by other women from the village. It opens the door to the idea that this narrative exists in other villages and areas with circumstances similar to Mughallis before and after the Nakba.

Looking at her past in retrospect, S.A. considers her pre-Nakba life a long path that led to where she is today. The importance of her testimony does not stem from the documentary aspect focused on by so many researchers who have worked on oral history of the Nakba. Indeed, she admitted that she received most information with a documentary nature from others who gave her details about the number of prisoners and martyrs during the attack of Zionist forces, and how the village fell into their control after it was destroyed. Rather, this study intends to examine perceptions and narratives given by the witness and her likes about the Nakba. For S.A., the Nakba resulted in an absolution from the injustice and oppression practiced by a powerful family (X) against her family and village. She elaborates on this injustice she was forced to endure in numerous stories. The prominent figures of family (X), based in the village of Bayt Jibrin, exercised numerous forms of forceful land acquisition with the help of allies from the village of 'Ajjur. For example, she says:

[X] used to give money to the riffraff of 'Ajjur village to incite them to loot and rob. Meanwhile, [X] remain calmly at their homes, surrounded by their guards. All they had to do is to gather those lowlifes, give them money, and order them to go to Mughallis, for someone had gotten married. As such, he must have gold . . . go and take what is rightfully theirs. They would carry what they can take and beat up whoever stands in their way. Our youths succeeded in capturing [one of the members of X family] who was loading the stolen goods and beat him up . . . That day my uncle was going to be sentenced to death for beating up the [X] family. The English came and took my uncle to be hanged. He was released from al-Ramla prison by someone from the house of al-Husayni, the father of al-Husayni. My grandfather went and begged him and said, he is my only son and he has been sentenced to death . . . [X] wrecked people's homes, may God curse them.

S.A. refers to the methods adapted by family (X) for increasing their control over the land and for accruing more power. The latter was the major source of tension between them and the people of her village, Mughallis.

Actually, the village of Bayt Jibrin is not theirs. They came and took it by force from its inhabitants. The latter gave it all up, along with their homes and everything else. The same thing also happened with the villages of ‘Ajjur and Tal al-Safi. . . . We decided that we will not give up our homes, even if they crush us. We will not allow them to take over any part of our land or to even inhabit our village . . . That is why they started pursuing us. We, the people of Mughallis, were resolved that no one from [X] family would be allowed to live in our village. That made the people of [X] even more determined . . . They purchased guns and started undertaking raids at night. Our in-laws from Tal al-Safi used to come and warn us against their raids . . . Each night, the young men would stay up all night. [X] family regularly raided homes that were at the far ends of the village, taking away the gold and people’s rightful earnings. The well-off members of [X] used to send the riffraff on their behalf, while they spent their time calmly enjoying their days.

Events experienced by S.A. herself in her childhood are mixed with those her mother and grandmother told her. She retells the stories with pride as a response to the arrogant control of the powerful families:

Truly weird things happened during the times of my father and grandfather . . . For example, they once swore to take a married woman, who was known for her beauty. Therefore, they told her husband to bring her. He divorced her and gave her away out of fear . . . My stepmother told us about a man from our village who had a pretty sister. He had land and nice houses. Someone from [X] family saw her and proposed to her. He took his sister and left for another village. He said, to hell with the land and houses . . . a true man . . . he said, I cannot give them my sister. So he left his land and his houses. He left everything behind. They say he returned later with a gun and shot the son of [X] and ran away, leaving the houses, the land, and everything else behind.

S.A. goes as far as regarding the Nakba as a just revenge. Someone came along and avenged against the (X) family and undermined their power. In fact, they gloat about the fate of the family and its prominent figures, who were killed and expelled by the Zionists like other refugees. A large number of the family members settled in a refugee camp in Bethlehem. Her memory of the Nakba – and thus her contemporary perception of the Nakba and its impact on her life trajectory – is viewed through the prism of her and its relationship to that family.

When the Zionists came, they [members of family (X)] were expelled before us and became beggars. They were lost and their children dispersed. One of them managed to stay and thought he would live happily in the land. They eventually expelled him from his land, ran him over with a car and crushed him completely. They [the Zionist military forces] forcefully removed them [family (X)] from their land and humiliated them. They butchered them. They deserve this death, they have earned all what has happened to them. They are riffraff, dregs. They used to pay the lowlifes and unleash them on people.

The Nakba also enabled upward social mobility for S.A.'s family. It transformed the family from small landowners, whose lands were threatened by the (X) family and their allies, into city dwellers. They live in the city of Hebron as the father refused to move to a refugee camp. Her father, brother, and husband invested their English language skills to provide a livelihood better than that available to refugees in camps. Later, the children's education led to prominent jobs and significantly improved the economic situation of the family. It increased their distinction vis-à-vis other refugees – especially family (X).

The youths [of our family] were educated and became learned and knowledgeable. We now have doctors, engineers, aeronautical engineers, and teachers in our family . . . Those who remained from [X] family regretted their circumstances and wished they had gone out with the others. Their children were not educated. All the peasants are now ahead of them, they [the peasants] were educated and became better. They now turn to our children after we have all left the land. After we left, the sons of [X] were lost, completely lost.

My father, brothers, and uncles used to work in Wadi al-Sirar. The land was not enough for our needs, there was barely any land to begin with. When we came to Galilee, my brother is the one who provided a good life for us. He was hard at work, moving wherever work took him then they learned and studied.

Consequently, although most discussions and debates concerning the Nakba center on the loss of land, the Nakba as a loss of land does not – from S.A.'s standpoint – pertain directly to her, but to family (X), which owned and controlled the land. In other words, for those who did not own land, the Nakba does not signal in their consciousness a loss of land. Approaching the Nakba in the Palestinian narrative as a “loss of land” thus prioritizes the segments of society that owned it in the first place.

Other narratives of women from the village of Mughallis indicate even more “extreme” views. S.A.'s female relative says that because girls and women did not own or inherit land, they had nothing to lose by way of dispossession. Similar examples are not documented, even though they are generally acknowledged. A common joke in Palestine is for someone to avoid participation in political activity ultimately viewed as tedious or ineffectual by saying, sarcastically, “I have given up my share of Jerusalem,” or something along the

same lines. This captures the dominant perception of the Nakba as a loss of land. The Palestinian collective consciousness tightly intertwines land and honor: selling one's land is a source of shame and insult; refugees' biggest sorrow concerns the loss of their land. How, then, can a collective Palestinian narrative of the Nakba accommodate the narrative of the landless? The question is more pressing since the Nakba – as mentioned above – contributed to the upward class mobility of some. These look back at the Nakba today in light of the changes that occurred to their lives, and cannot offer a narrative of the past dissociated from their own personal trajectories.

Interviews with two men from the village of Mughallis reveal the hegemony of the ideology of national commitment and, in doing so, are useful by way of comparison.<sup>16</sup> For example, the interviewer asked one of the villagers of Mughallis about the kinds of armament available in the village during the Zionist attack on the neighboring village of Tal al-Safi during the Nakba. The man started listing their kinds and amounts, which were naturally modest on both fronts. He added that the people of the village had sold their cattle in order to purchase arms prior to the Zionist attacks and massacres because of “feuds over the land with the inhabitants of the village of ‘Ajjur.”<sup>17</sup> The interviewee stated that the weapons were bought to guard the land and protect it against attackers – that is, the villagers of ‘Ajjur. These arms were later available when Zionist forces raided the village. In fact, opponents of the villagers of Mughallis reported these arms to the Mandate officials. The British raided the village and arrested the interviewee's uncle. His lawyer saved him from a death sentence by confessing that the weapons were owned by the whole village and were merely used for guarding purposes.

Significantly, the interviewer ignored discussing these “feuds with the village of ‘Ajjur,” despite the fact that they were the impetus for purchasing arms. The long interview does not discuss the nature of power relations in the village or the surrounding area prior to the Nakba. Often, the interviewee avoids talking about the matter. The two village men interviewed do not touch upon the details that the peasant women explained at length. At times, it seems clear that there is an intentional aversion to such details. Producing an analysis of these interviews is beyond the scope of this paper. They are evoked here, however, to guide the exploration of the dominance of the general ideology. The same avoidance is perceptible in numerous interviews pertaining to other villages. The idyllic social cohesion portrayed seems improbable and unrealistic, but in keeping with the dominant ideology of national commitment.

## **Complex Marginalization in Oral History of the Nakba**

The development of oral history from its initial perception as a secondary option in the absence of traditional historical sources has revealed a new understanding of its value and role. Oral history is concerned with what falls from the cracks of official documents. Historians who make use of oral history view history not as a series of political events; rather, oral history adds a dynamic perception of historical processes by accounting for the perceptions of the narrators, taking notice of how they viewed the events. Concurrently,

there is a shift toward the questions of “how” and “why” at the expense of “when” and “where.” Oral history’s richness is, in large part, not in its revelation of “truths,” but in bringing forth what the narrators believe to be “true.” In this manner, it turns to the modes through which narrators remember what had transpired, not simply the events themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Yet oral history, which within the Palestinian context was meant to grant a voice to the marginalized, has also been engaged in complex processes of marginalization. Marginalization in this case study (that of the women of Mughallis village) occurs on multiple levels. First, marginalization by elites through their interest in writing the history of the middle and upper classes. This marginalization occurs on class basis and has been adapted by a number of Palestinian research institutes and forms a central current of Palestinian historical writing, focusing on non-official sources, such as diaries and memoirs, to document the lives of Palestinians from the end of the Ottoman era until the Nakba.<sup>19</sup> A second kind of marginalization emerged out of an urban bias. This form of marginalization occurs on a cultural basis and results in writing the history of cities and what happened to them and to their inhabitants during the Nakba. Scholars of this approach have read the Nakba as a force that aborted burgeoning modernity in Palestinian cities. In this manner, they granted a seminal role to the city in the Palestinian nationalist and cultural movement.

Palestinian oral history arose to challenge the Zionist narrative of the Nakba, to offer the Palestinian narrative of those who were forcefully removed from their land.<sup>20</sup> It seeks to emphasize what happened in an attempt to triumph in the war of narratives. This has serious political implications and epistemological consequences, which are given secondary consideration, in total harmony with the ideology of national commitment.<sup>21</sup> Yet, the narrative of the Palestinian peasant functions not only as a response to the Zionist narrative, but also to the narrative of the urban middle class. Peasant narratives highlight the participation of villagers and their nationalist role, offering a response to their marginalization at the hands of those who had the means – both monetary and cultural – to write history. The narrative of the Palestinian peasant woman offers a further response to that of the male peasant, as well as to the other narratives mentioned.

However, a third kind of marginalization produced by Palestinian oral history practices is a gender-based marginalization directed at women. The matter can be simply revealed through calculating the percentage that women’s testimonies comprise of the total oral testimonies in any of the oral histories of the Nakba. Rochelle Davis, in her study of memorial books documenting village life in Palestine before the Nakba, states: “I was unable to find in the memorial books or oral history collections in Arabic any account by a village woman of life prior to 1948.”<sup>22</sup> Browsing the lists of testimonies in any of the projects seeking to document the oral history of the Nakba is sufficient to illustrate the marginalization of women’s testimonies. For example, the website Palestine Remembered, through an impressive effort, succeeds in documenting 621 video interviews about the Nakba and life before 1948. These cover 395 different locations, including villages and cities, with an average of two testimonies per location, and constitute around three thousand hours of recording. However, women’s testimonies occupy merely 40 interviews

out of the total 621.<sup>23</sup> The discrepancy is symptomatic of the attempts to document and write oral history – in fact, the matter may be even more imbalanced in other cases.

On all these levels, ideological and methodological factors intermingle. On the one hand, there is a pressure exercised by a general ideology, whose marginalizing effects may not be noticed by scholars. On the other hand, there is an explicit ideology emanating from the political field: the ideology of national commitment. Thus, the dominance of that ideology within the field of oral history becomes even more complex when it comes to narratives of peasant women concerning the Nakba. As such, the study of Palestinian peasant women's narratives of the Nakba is a crucial epistemological contribution. While it presents the narrative of the peasant woman herself, it also functions – by virtue of its position as a marginalized narrative – as a necessary way to identify the dominant narrative and reveal its hegemony.

Scholars of Palestinian village life and the Palestinian peasantry have tried to use oral testimonies to rewrite the history of Palestine before as well as during the Nakba, but they have been limited by the preoccupation with arriving at a particular picture of life in the Palestinian village prior to the Nakba. The issue can be attributed to the fact that those scholars who expanded the deployment of oral history to include the countryside were predominantly anthropologists and folklore specialists.<sup>24</sup> Their interest in studying village life was driven by nostalgia. Moreover, it was undergirded by a bourgeois attitude that celebrated folklore.<sup>25</sup> The drive toward documenting cannot be denied. However, it was overpowered by the tendency to look for folklore with the aim of preserving it. As such, the work was driven by a preoccupation with painting an idealized picture of the village prior to the Nakba, turning it almost into a postcard.<sup>26</sup> Examples of this approach include the project undertaken by Birzeit University to document the ruined villages and *Majallat al-turath wa al-mujtama'* (Journal of Heritage and Society) issued by Jam'iyat In'ash al-Usra (Society for Family Rejuvenation).<sup>27</sup>

Salim Tamari approaches the abovementioned tendency in a manner that illuminates its connection to the dominant ideology of national commitment. He claims:

The culture of collective resistance and Palestinians' feeling of encirclement by the Israeli military regime buttressed among the urban population a consensual ideology that acted to reduce the perception of internal conflict. Intraurban class conflict and other social disparities were publicly deferred in the interests of national unity. . . . To such constructs of a common destiny have evolved in the last few decades. One revolves around the struggle for the preservation of an idyllic traditional culture rooted in rural virtues and expressed as the essence of the Palestinian soul. Urban intellectuals and academics, active in folklore societies and intent upon protecting Palestinian national culture from erosion as a result of the forces of colonial settlement and modernity, contributed to the emergence of this intellectual tradition in the 1970s and '80s. The second construct, which has become very powerful since the early 1990s, and especially during the intifada, was the millennial Islamic revivalism adopted by Hamas and Islamic Jihad.<sup>28</sup>

Tamari continues: “Both intellectual tendencies – the secular defense of the virtues of rural culture and Islamic revivalism – were united in their attempt to revive from the distant past a community that was marked by serenity and concord.”<sup>29</sup> This apt description explicates the tendency to avoid anything that may tarnish the image of the idyllic past. The matter is exacerbated by the overriding nostalgia characterizing Palestinian historical research more generally – even that carried out using non-traditional methods. In an in-depth interview, Salim Tamari makes the point: “there is a nostalgic longing for the past experienced by everyone. It is as if each of us is writing the history of his or her social origins.”<sup>30</sup>

The ideology of nationalist commitment framed all of these various approaches, exerting pressure on the researcher, the subject, and the entire research undertaking. In fact, it dominates any research product. In this manner, criticizing the ideology becomes unlikely as well as undesirable. From a procedural standpoint, there are numerous ways in which the dominant ideology and its modes of marginalization have affected oral history and the process of collecting testimonies. These include: identifying the objective of research projects and their research questions; selecting interview subjects; and the construction of oral history as a “national duty.”

With regard to the selection of research objectives, there is an interest in supporting general perceptions and reported accounts concerning the Nakba. The questions asked by the different researchers exhibit many similarities, as if they are searching for confirmation concerning information and narratives they already have. They do not appear to be on the lookout for narratives that might have fallen through the cracks of the dominant narrative. Perhaps the questioning of the reliability and veracity of oral narrative drove researchers into a preoccupation with verifying the accuracy of oral testimonies vis-à-vis previously confirmed information. This came at the expense of paying attention to the centrality of the oral narrative itself. In this manner, questions that may potentially undermine the perception of idyllic social cohesion prior to the Nakba are preempted. Further, social mobility in the wake of the Nakba and its effects on the lives of the poor and marginalized are also sidelined. The harmony between the official and oral narrative does not indicate that marginalization does not exist. What is more significant in this case is understanding the reasons for this harmony. Additionally, why are most of the oral narratives about the Nakba almost identical? The event itself is formed of multiple interlacing events, which took place in different locations and under diverging circumstances. Listening to a large sample of interviews with refugees demonstrates the extent to which stories and narratives have been internalized by people to the extent that they retell it as if they have lived it all even though they have never witnessed it.

With regard to the choice of interview subjects, the concentration of potential interviewees in refugee camps has led to a reluctance in finding interview subjects elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> Refugee camps have become important sites for the reproduction of the official narrative, as the marginalized come to adapt the official narrative and reproduce it. The unique testimony of S.A. from Mughallis can be explained in part by the fact that she did not live in a refugee camp. As such, she was not involved in the process of adapting and reproducing the official narrative. Further, Swedenburg argues that people

who do not occupy a position of power tend to demur to “experts” during interviews. These local authorities are public speakers and religious scholars who are brought forth to speak on account of their social status, education, and political connections, leading to a clear marginalization of other narratives. This also results in the reproduction of the official narrative and the sidelining of women. Speaking with strangers is male territory, particularly when it pertains to public affairs.<sup>32</sup>

Sayigh highlights how males were represented to her while she was gathering oral narratives in the Lebanese refugee camps as an initial level of marginalization of women and their testimonies as less trustworthy.<sup>33</sup> Sayigh also mentions that the women’s narratives that she recorded were taken from women living in refugee camps and who had lived the evolution and reproduction of the national narrative. She even gathered these testimonies in public – which means the interviews were conducted in the presence of other women, family members, and neighbors, including men, and sometimes inside “political organization offices.”<sup>34</sup> The intervention in each female’s testimony was obvious and Sayigh acknowledges this, in addition to the influence of ongoing political developments and security tensions during the process of gathering the testimonies. Such factors shape testimony and produce a disconnect between what the witness wants to say and what she can say under the circumstances of the interview.

More generally, the setting and circumstances of the camp, where the prevalent ideology imposes, consciously and unconsciously, an official narrative, affects the personal narratives collected from its denizens. Hence, the testimony of women who did not live in a refugee camp, the place where the national narrative was reproduced most intensely, provides the possibility of discovering or recovering narratives less directly shaped by the dominant ideology of national commitment. On a more general level, the assumption here is that if any effort made to gather oral narratives of the marginalized considers only one determinant, whether gender, social class, place of origins, and so on, it will fail to account for other factors of marginalization. The value of testimonies from Mughallis’s women villagers discussed here is because it accounts for marginalization on multiple levels.

Finally, the conception of oral history as a kind of “national duty” is perhaps the biggest obstacle in any attempt to circumvent the hegemony of the ideology of national commitment. Researchers view their work – whether implicitly or explicitly – in large part as a national commitment, aimed at preserving the narrative of those who have been denied their rights. The sense haunts researchers’ every question and every new undertaking. It drives researchers to arrive at data and conclusions that do not contradict the national narrative and do not undermine the image of Palestinians as a people with a just cause, victims and heroes at the same time. The hegemony of ideology also extends to the process of writing and publishing. The entire research process is implicated in the reproduction, whether consciously or unconsciously, of the dominant ideology and its effect on historical writing and sociological research more generally.

## Conclusion

The testimony underpinning this contribution raises questions around its significance beyond a mere concern for preserving the narrative of a marginalized segment of society – as crucial as that is. Yet, there are other important elements. As Swedenburg notes, “Investigating oral history leads directly into important political issues such as people’s historical awareness, and the meaning of past struggles for the present.”<sup>35</sup> The oral history of S.A. and other women from Mughallis enables us to see the Nakba as a transformative event that restructured the distribution of social and political power. It contributed to creating social mobility for a number of families that did not possess land. Furthermore, it shaped the attitudes of people vis-à-vis the national movement, affecting their involvement in it. Identifying the aim of the struggle as reclaiming the land did not resonate with those who did not possess land. In fact, for some, the pre-Nakba years were ones of abuse, oppression, and hard work. The Nakba introduced new tools for acquiring and augmenting social capital while previous ones were eradicated.<sup>36</sup>

Limiting the goals of the Palestinian national struggle to the issue of reclaiming the land did not resonate directly with these women. They did not own land, either because they along with their families were not allowed to own land or because their families prevented them as women from owning it. The issue is captured succinctly in a personal experience I was told by one of the sons of family (X). The story was told as part of a testimony aiming at verifying the relationship between his family’s village and neighboring villages. In a moment of frankness, he remembered the first intifada. He was by the entrance of a refugee camp. He and a number of other boys were throwing stones at Israeli patrols in front of an old woman’s house. She yelled at them, asking them to move so that the soldiers would not raid her house. She called at one of the young boys and said for all to hear: “Aren’t you the son of so-and-so? Well, these are the kids of (X), they have a land to fight for, what do you have? Your father does not even have land the size of his ‘thing’ in this whole country! Why are you throwing rocks?!” Such expressions of internal division are exactly the kinds of narratives that have been subject to the “suppression” described by Swedenburg.

The “suppression” that Swedenburg described is comparable to the “silence” (perhaps better understood as “silencing”) discussed by Beshara Doumani in his article, “al-Mahdhufun min al-sird al-tarikhi” (Those Obliterated from the Historical Narrative).<sup>37</sup> Doumani points to the marginalization of Palestine’s *inhabitants* at the expense of the hyperfocus, particularly from Europeans, on Palestine as *place*, claiming:

the obsession with the land and with what is at stake for the political struggle, necessitates obfuscating the inhabitants when it comes to constructing historical narratives. The latter silence is not due to lack of knowledge about the inhabitants. Rather, it is part of the process of knowledge production itself. This obliteration – despite its dilution over time – deeply penetrated both academic and non-academic writing during the twentieth century. It ended up – since the 1920s – significantly narrowing the scope of these writings, limiting their focus to the official political struggle over the country.<sup>38</sup>

Ironically, silencing was likewise practiced by researchers interested in the Palestinian narrative. The dominant political ideology contributed to that process of silencing by forcefully reading all events as part of the political struggle while ignoring underlying social and economic problematics. Historical writing – and this is perhaps one of its values – incessantly refers to what it seeks to marginalize. In other words, it bespeaks it, never fully succeeding in obliterating it. Oral history is even more capable of revealing and undoing marginalization for its substance is life and the production of meaning.

The oral history of the Nakba, like its official history, is characterized by fragmentation, loss, and “suppression.” Further, it illuminates complex patterns of marginalization. However, time is not on the side of those interested in the narratives of Palestinian peasant women who witnessed the Nakba. If oral historians of Palestine think they have completed the largest portion of their work by collecting the interviews now available, the voice of the Palestinian peasant woman will remain forever marginal unless the effort of collecting oral testimonies is resumed, this time focusing specifically on women who have lived outside of the official narrative and the sites of its reproduction. Scholars’ liberation from the ideology of national commitment potentially opens the doors for a better understating of the Nakba, not as an event outside of Palestinian history orchestrating its movement, but rather as one event amidst a sequence of events leading up to the present.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 Mughallis is located 30 kilometers northwest of Hebron and 200 meters above sea level. A nearby road, to which the village was connected, used to carry convoys between Bayt Jibrin and al-Ramla. It is surrounded by the villages of ‘Ajjur, Jilya, Idhna, and Tal al-Safi, with residents from various tribes, most notably the Abu ‘Ajamiyya, al-Sharif, al-Mughallisa, and al-Sarabita. It comprised 11,459 dunams (or approximately 2,832 acres), none of which was sold to Zionists. In 1948, the population of the village was estimated at 626 people, most of whom worked cultivating grains, as well as fruits and vegetables. The village was also known in the region for keeping cattle, camels, and mules, as well as beekeeping and honey. The majority of the village’s nearly 130 houses were destroyed and their inhabitants displaced during Operation An-Far in 1948. The villagers were forced to leave their houses once the Zionist forces arrived to Tal al-Safi and started shooting at them. Among the martyrs in the village were Ahmad al-Mughallisa, and a number of the village’s youths and men were taken prisoners. In 1955, Gefen settlement was established north of the village. In its latest statistics in 1998, UNRWA estimated the number of refugees from the village at 3,847. See: Walid Khalidi, ed., *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2001), 219–220; and the “Welcome to Mughallis” page of the Palestine Remembered website, online at [www.palestineremembered.com/Hebron/Mughallis/index.html](http://www.palestineremembered.com/Hebron/Mughallis/index.html) (accessed 11 May 2017).
- 2 Ted Swedenburg, “Problems of Oral History: The 1936 Revolt in Palestine,” *Birzeit Research Review* 2 (Winter 1985–1986): 30–42.
- 3 Researchers’ biases and specializations have often directed the aims and objectives of oral interviews. As Adel Yahya described working

- on one of the most important project for documenting Palestinian oral history: “During Bakr Abu Kishk’s presidency of the Center for Documentation and Research at Birzeit University, the economic aspects were focused upon. However, when Sharif Kana’na – who is an anthropologist – became president, heritage and folklore came to the fore. While during the presidency of Ali al-Jirbawi and Saleh Abdel Jawad – both are political scientists – political aspects became the most prominent ones.” See: Adel Yahya, “Mashari’ al-tarikh al-shafawi al-Filastini ila ayna?” [Where To for Palestinian Oral History Projects?], in *Kitab abhath al-mu’tamar al-’ilmi: al-tarikh al-shafawi bayna al-waqi’ wa al-tumuh* [Proceeding of the Academic Conference: Oral History between Reality and Ambition] (Gaza: Islamic University, 2006), vol. 1, 22.
- 4 The issue is less intense for researchers who have lived outside of Palestine.
  - 5 For example, Jamil Hilal discusses this ideology clearly in his explanation of the Palestinian transition from an ideology of liberation to a state ideology. Jamil Hilal, *Ida’a ‘ala ma’zaq al-nukhba al-siyasiyya al-Filastiniyya* [Highlighting the Dilemma of the Palestinian Political Elite] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2013), 10–12.
  - 6 Bayan Nuwayid al-Hout, *al-Qiyadat wa al-mu’assasat al-siyasiyya fi Filastin: 1917–1948* [Political Leadership and Institutions in Palestine: 1917–1948] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1981); Nafez Nazzal, *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee, 1948* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978); Julie M. Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Rosemary Sayigh, *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Books, 1979).
  - 7 Rosemary Sayigh, “Palestinian Camp Women as Tellers of History,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27, no. 2 (1998): 43; Peteet, *Gender in Crisis*.
  - 8 Sayigh, “Palestinian Camp Women,” 43.
  - 9 See Kais Firro, *al-Ma’rifa al-tarikhyya fi al-gharb* [Historical Knowledge in the West] (Doha: al-Markaz al-‘Arabi li-l-abhath wa dirasat al-siyasat, 2013), 280–81.
  - 10 Resorting to oral history also came as a result of researchers’ search for easier, more accessible, and less costly methods. This may explain why young scholars in Gaza were particularly interested in oral history: the availability of large numbers of refugees in a limited geographical space was a benefit to academic researchers, and resulted in many initiatives to collect testimonies.
  - 11 Saleh Abdel Jawad, for example, explains the dilemma of archiving, as well as the loss of documents that paved the way for oral history research in the Palestinian case: Saleh Abdel Jawad, “Limadha la nastati’a kitab tarikhina al-mu’asir duna istikhdam al-tarikh al-shafawi? Harb 1948 ka-hala dirasiyya” [Why Our History Cannot Be Written without Oral History: 1948 War as a Case Study], *Majallat al-dirasat al-Filastiniyya* 64 (Autumn 2005): 46–47, 56–59.
  - 12 See: Yahya, “Mashari’ al-tarikh al-shafawi,” 21.
  - 13 The Nakba also gained a centrality in Palestinian oral history because most of its contemporaries are aging and may not be around to tell their stories much longer, hence the sense of urgency and priority for research. The loss of the Nakba’s contemporaries would mean the loss of testimonies directly linked to the event, which would impact all research aiming to examine pre-Nakba social life in Palestine. This sense of urgency does not emerge in research on later events, such as the 1967 defeat, the Palestinian revolution, the invasion of Lebanon, the Sabra and Shatila massacre, and other major events up to the present. Notably, this sense of urgency was limited to the collection of oral testimonies, not their use in research. The reasoning was first to collect the testimonies before losing the witnesses who bear them, and then later to think about what to do with them. Thus, researchers produced a great amount of interview and other raw material without the need to process or frame any research based on it.
  - 14 For reasons related to the research topic as well as personal reasons, I have used interview subjects’ initials rather than full names. All quotes are translations of direct verbatim quotes from the original Arabic witnesses’ testimonies. Interviews were conducted by the author and are in his possession.
  - 15 Even in her pre-Nakba life, she told many details about the freedom she gradually acquired in dealing with her father and relatives, which is significant in relation to the testimony in question.
  - 16 Interviews with Ahmad Abu ‘Ajamiyya and Muhammad Abu ‘Ajamiyya conducted by Fawwaz Salameh, 18–20 September 2006, Jordan, online at [www.palestineremembered.com/Hebron/Mughallis/ar/index.html#OralHistory](http://www.palestineremembered.com/Hebron/Mughallis/ar/index.html#OralHistory) (accessed 24 May 2017).
  - 17 The witness states the village bought around fourteen shotguns. S.A. said that the village inhabitants bought six shotguns to fend off the attackers from ‘Ajjur, who were hired by the (X) family.
  - 18 Sonia Nimr, “al-Tarikh al-shafawi: hikaya amm manhaj?” [Oral History: Narrative or Method?], in *Kitab abhath al-mu’tamar al-’ilmi: al-tarikh al-shafawi bayna al-waqi’ wa al-tumuh* [Proceeding of the Academic Conference: Oral History between Reality and Ambition] (Gaza: Islamic University, 2006), 247–49.

- 19 In fact, this current has flourished in recent years in Palestine, due to a proliferation of social history writing among Palestinian sociologists and historians. One of the most prominent attempts in this field is the Institute for Palestine Studies' "family papers" (*awraq 'a'iliyya*) series. Other articles and recurring sections in *Majallat al-dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, including the "Fi al-dhakira" (In Memory) section, write social history using the biographies and autobiographies of middle- and upper-middle-class individuals.
- 20 In other cases, the official Arab narrative was the narrative that Palestinian oral history is offering a response to and attempting to escape its dominance.
- 21 By referring to this dimension of historical research, he intended average people, who were not his subject. A large portion of oral testimonies were used as information supporting the official narrative. The latter is engaged in responding to the Zionist narrative concerning the Nakba and ethnic cleansing. The concern with the witnesses and focusing on them as research subjects was a later development.
- 22 Rochelle Davis, "Peasant Narratives: Memorial Books Sources for Jerusalem Village History," *Jerusalem Quarterly File* 20 (Winter 2004): 62–72, quote at 67.
- 23 See "Nakba's Oral History Interviews Listing," *PalestineRemembered.com*, posted 31 March 2004, online at [www.palestineremembered.com/OralHistory/Interviews-Listing/Story1151.html](http://www.palestineremembered.com/OralHistory/Interviews-Listing/Story1151.html) (accessed 26 May 2017).
- 24 Amahl Bishara, "al-Riwaya al-shafawiyya: taffa'ul da'im ma'a al-hadir wa al-mustaqbal" [Oral Narrative: A Constant Interaction between the Present and the Future], *Haqq al-'Awda* 20 (2006): 8, online at [www.badil.org/ar/publications-ar/periodicals-ar/haqelawda-ar/item/274-article03.html](http://www.badil.org/ar/publications-ar/periodicals-ar/haqelawda-ar/item/274-article03.html) (accessed 12 May 2017).
- 25 'Abdallah Laroui, *al-Idiyulujiyya al-'Arabiyya al-mu'asira* [Contemporary Arab Ideology] (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-thaqafi al-'Arabi, 1995), 208–9.
- 26 Rochelle Davis's overview of the genre of "memorial books" in Palestine, which she approaches as one of oral narrative, reveals the attentiveness to the memorial aspect and the nostalgia to a perished mode of life. Davis, "Peasant Narratives," 62–77.
- 27 There is a coherent exposition of the project in Davis, "Peasant Narratives," 63–64.
- 28 Salim Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 51–52.
- 29 Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea*, 52.
- 30 Author interview, Salim Tamari, Ramallah, July 2012. There is also a passing comment by Davis referring to how researchers are often interested in pursuing the history of their own villages, Davis, "Peasant Narratives," 64.
- 31 It is worth mentioning that the Gaza Strip witnessed, at various times, an increase in the initiatives attempting to document oral testimonies, as seen in the sheer number of research projects undertaken by history students in Gaza's universities. One may conjecture that the abundance of refugees in Gaza and the ease with which they can be reached has led to this proliferation.
- 32 Swedenburg attributes the reserve of women and others he met during the late 1970s and early 1980s, as he was carrying out his research on the 1936 revolution, to "the current political climate or to the long history of suffering endured by the Peasant due to problems instigated by strangers." This gestures toward the way political circumstances affect oral testimonies. In fact, the period during which Swedenburg undertook his fieldwork witnessed a strong hold of the ideology of national commitment, a hegemony that climaxed during the first intifada. See Swedenburg, "Some Issues."
- 33 Rosemary Sayigh, "Women's Nakba Stories between Being and Knowing," in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, ed. Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 138.
- 34 Sayigh, "Women's Nakba Stories," 140.
- 35 Swedenburg, "Some Issues," 18.
- 36 There are numerous indications of this transformation. One of the signs of the change in the value of social capital is the rise in the value of a university degree and its contribution toward improving the condition of its earner. The university degree replaced land. Capital became connected to education more than to land, family lineage, or wealth. The dramatic series *al-Taghriba al-Filastiniyya* (The Palestinian Exodus) dealt with these issues in a commendable manner.
- 37 Beshara Doumani, "al-Mahdhufun min al-sird al-tarikhī" [Those Obliterated from the Historical Narrative], *Majallat al-dirasat al-Filastiniyya* 84 (2010): 35–41.
- 38 Doumani, "al-Mahdhufun," 35.