

Amneh

My Grandmother and My Feminist Inspiration

I dedicate this article to the memory of my grandmother, Amneh 'Awad Taha-Hamed.

Throughout the history of the Palestinian people, women have been involved with wars and upheavals, personal losses, and exile, as well as with social, educational, and economic changes. The Nakba's (Palestinian catastrophe of 1948) memories and stories are combined with fear, loss, violence, humiliation, and insecure feelings. Palestinian mothers and grandmothers, citizens of Israel play an active role in keeping the Palestinian identity and the traditional structures alive by passing their memories to the next generations. As a result of the Nakba, and the confiscation of lands, women started to stay at home and take on domestic roles to preserve Palestinian cultural and religious values. This was my experience with my grandmother, Amneh, who had many personal and diverse experiences within the context of the social and political changes that took place in her life, especially when my grandfather was detained. During that time, she remained with her four children and gave birth to her fifth child without the presence of my grandfather who was in Israeli prison. Amneh put it upon herself to pass her memories and reflections to her grandchildren, to keep her story, and her people's history and narrative alive.

On the evening of 28 December 2016, my grandmother Amneh 'Awad Taha-Hamed, ninety-three years old, passed away peacefully from our world. She was the eldest among her siblings. She was married to my grandfather Khalil Dakhil Hamed (his body rested in peace in April 1991), and they became parents of five sons and two daughters. My father, Yousef, was the eldest (his body rested in peace in March 2015). My grandmother was a happy, generous, and proud woman, and was a real fighter. She was never frightened or

intimated by the occasional visits of the Israeli police, who sometimes arrested her husband, or one of her sons, for their political activities—in fact, this was something she was proud of.

In this article, I combine some of the findings from my PhD research and my personal life experiences with my grandparents, especially my grandmother Amneh, who has been the greatest source of inspiration in my life. She showed me at a young age the importance of women's roles in public and private spaces.

Historical Background: Palestinians Citizens of Israel and the Nakba

I would like to give readers a short historical background about myself and my people. I was born in Nazareth, and lived there until 2007, before I moved to Ireland. I belong to a group of Palestinians who are citizens of Israel and who became a national minority in our homeland in May 1948—the year Palestinian history referred to as the “Nakba,” which means the Palestinian catastrophe or the Palestinian disaster. It is a disaster that befell the Palestinian people after the Jewish forces (subsequently Israeli) embarked on a massive operation of ethnic cleansing¹ that aimed at ridding Palestine of its indigenous population in order to establish a nation-state for Jews (Zureik; Pappé). The Nakba caused the majority of Palestinians (about 90 percent) to be uprooted as refugees to the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and neighbouring Arab countries, whereas about ten percent (numbering around 120,000) of Palestinians remained in their homeland. They were, therefore, largely cut off from their own people and the rest of the Arab nation. The Palestinian citizens of Israel are Muslims, Christians, and Druze, and currently, they comprise around 20 to 22 percent of Israel's population. They still face many discriminatory laws from the governmental and nongovernmental institutions, as successive Israeli governments have refused to treat them as a national minority.

However, there are also displaced Palestinians inside Israel itself. In fact, they constitute 25 percent² of the Palestinian minority within Israel. As with the refugees, these internally displaced Palestinians (IDP) have also been deprived of their property, as their lands, houses, and assets were confiscated by the state. For this reason, they were absent from their homes on that day that the Israeli authorities started to register the Palestinians who remained on their land. In a Kafkaesque touch, these people are described in Israeli law as “present absentees”—that is, persons who are physically present inside Israel but are legally absent according to the state's property laws (Masalha, *Catastrophe* 23). They are citizens of Israel without the right to return to their original villages, towns, or lands that they were uprooted from in 1948 or some years later, which violates international law and UN resolutions, in particular UN General Assembly Resolution 194³ of 1948. Most of their villages were

destroyed during the armed conflict or were later destroyed in order to prevent their return. Their lands and homes were subsequently confiscated by Israel under a variety of laws, but mainly under the absentee property law (1950).⁴ This law protects the property of absentee owners, but in reality, this statute denies the absentee the right to return of his or her property. The present absentees are also known as the internally displaced. Most of the appeals for the release of property by present absentees have been rejected by the Supreme Court in Israel. The properties, mostly land and houses, were confiscated and later transferred to the Development Authority. The absentee property compensation law (1973)⁵ removes the right of consideration for releasing the property and replaces it with the right of compensation only.

Furthermore, Masalha (“Collective Memory”) makes the point that the internally displaced find themselves in a complex situation, given that they are like refugees in their homeland. Despite the historical, geographical, cultural, political, and national connections with, and similarity to, the other Palestinian citizens of Israel, they remain displaced in their own eyes and in those of the rest of the Palestinian minority. They are in a very weak position—“a minority within the minority.” Nevertheless, they have created their own tools of protest and are demanding their rights in a state claiming to be the only democratic regime in the Middle East.

When my siblings and I were children, my parents used to take us to visit the remains of Palestinian towns and villages near our home in Nazareth in northern Israel, or in other areas, which had been destroyed to create the state. Although many residents of these places had been expelled beyond the 1949 armistice lines, others had become internally displaced persons, and, as such, they had lost all their property—they had become present absentees. The internally displaced persons issue resonates with me because at each village site we visited, my father could name families among our neighbours in Nazareth who had been expelled from that place.

My PhD research considers IDP women in Israel, as I examine how Nakba memories affect these women, how they remember the Nakba, and what they may remember about it. Moreover, the aim of this research was also to situate the Palestinian women narratives as speakers and listeners so to challenge the Palestinian history, social structures, and attitudes that have silenced and excluded these stories and narratives for decades, either with or without intention (Sayigh). My research focuses on the personal experiences of first generation IDP women since 1948, and seeks to link these memories and reflections to the lives of second, third, and fourth generation IDP women.

All of my research participants experienced the Nakba through the many roles they played as women (mothers, wives, etc.), as they were often the emotional centre in the family. As a result, they often found themselves having to

simultaneously manage their own anxiety while caring for others. But one of the most difficult things they experienced was the loss of economic resources, which affected their lives and their self-confidence. They were taken from their traditional environment and lifestyle without the aid of new knowledge or skills to help them manage their new lives, the consequences of which were devastating. Their resettlement to an unfamiliar space has left some of them depressed and unhappy, with deep feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. Based on my research interviews, I can conclude here that the research participants, like the rest of the IDPs, especially the female ones, found they had lost all of the freedom their living space had afforded before their displacement. This resulted in a lack of safety and security, and the social attitudes they experienced from the rest of their people, the “locals,” did not help to challenge these feelings. They felt alone, uprooted, and without support; they were left to cope with their own feelings of agony and longing.

All of my PhD research participants emphasized that their hometown or village was ethnically cleansed in 1948, and they have lived in a “host” or “shelter” town since. It was important for them to tell this to their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, for if one day they were allowed to return there, they would straight away syntax. Fatma Kassem has found the same in her research as IDP women told her they were not from the towns in which lived, and such a viewpoint “indirectly represents the interviewees’ perception of historic events ... [to] emphasize their pre-1948 origins” (Kassem 97).

My grandparents and their relatives are not IDPs, as they are originally from Nazareth, and most of them remained in Nazareth (only very few relatives became refugees in Syria). Yet there are some similarities between the IDP stories and my grandparent’s story. My grandparents’ family, and other families from Nazareth and surrounding villages, had their lands confiscated by Israeli authorities in 1948-1949. The land was used to establish new government offices in 1954, as well as to build a new Jewish development town next to Nazareth, which was called “*Natzeret P'illit*” (Upper Nazareth) in 1957.

As a result, my grandparents had to rent a house with a garden, before they bought an old house close to their lands. This situation caused much pressure and stress, especially to Amneh, who was expected and forced to manage the household with very limited resources. But Amneh was a very strong woman with an inspiring personality, and she ended up managing her household, planting vegetables and grains in her small garden, and participating in political and social activities in her city.

I grew up listening to Amneh’s stories and adventures, and this had a great effect on me and my personality. I wanted to be like my grandmother—a strong and active woman. Furthermore, this affected my academic life, as during my

undergraduate and postgraduate studies, I chose Palestinian women's lives, private and public ones, as my research topic.

The influence of my grandmother on her family, as well as my research participants on their families, is very strong, and links to the Palestinian appreciation of motherhood, which is highly regarded in "political and cultural texts" (Abu-Duhou 85). Jamileh Abu-Duhou concludes that "what is more significant for Palestinian women is the need to resist and to survive this ongoing violent oppression—needs which are strongly linked to the national aspirations of the Palestinian people" (89).

Why Amneh?

Amneh was a model of feminism and freedom. When I was as a ten-year-old girl, she held my hand as we attended a protest together in Nazareth in September 1982 against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Sabra and Shatila massacre.⁶ During the protest, Israeli policemen and soldiers attacked us, but my grandmother held my hand and never let go of my hand as we started to run away for our own safety.

Amneh was very generous in sharing with others her personal and collective stories and memories, as many researchers and activists came to hear from her until her last days, since her memory was very strong and sharp. In addition to her engaging way of telling her narrative and stories about women's struggle since the 1920s, she had a very strong personality and was both self-assured and self-confident. Amneh used to tell us about the difficult life that Palestinians had under the British Mandate (1918 until May 1948), during and after the Nakba in 1948, and with Israeli military rule,⁷ which lasted until 1966. She talked about the poverty, unemployment, resistance, and managing the family life alone while my grandfather was in the jail for his political activism. I still remember her stories about the Israeli occupation of Nazareth in July 1948; my father was only a two-day-old baby when the soldiers brutally collected the men and discarded the women, as they entered the houses in search of guns and ammunition.

Amneh was not secular. She was a Muslim who used to pray and fast during Ramadan,⁸ but she believed in humanity and justice more. She had a great sense of humour, and was a real model of giving without limits. She was courageous, and she managed to organize both her public and private life—out of a strong belief in the importance of her role and its impact on change. My grandmother followed my grandfather and became a member in the communist party in Palestine, and after 1948, she also became a member in the democratic women's movement in Israel. She used to protest with other female members and activists demanding the release of the male members of the communist

party and other political prisoners. She used to attend seminars and meetings weekly; members and activists would gather in her small house to plan various programs and activities. She worked tirelessly, and did her best to raise a family while combining her political activities.

What Have I Learned from Amneh?

I have vivid memories of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.⁹ I was ten years old then, and I can say that it was the beginning of my political life and awareness. I participated with my grandmother in demonstrations against the Lebanon war and the Sabra and Shatila massacre in my city, Nazareth, and we faced police violence and harassment on an ongoing basis. As a child, I could not forget these events; and those memories are still vivid in my mind today. Since September 1982, I have been active in many organizations for Palestinian minority rights and women's rights.

During high school, I was elected twice as the pupils' council chairperson and a member of the National Arab High Schools Committee. During my undergraduate study in Haifa University, I became a member of the Arab Students Committee. The seeds of my adult political awareness were, thus, formed during those significant years. The fact that I was born into a political family was very helpful and was a supporting factor for personal new experiences that most of my colleagues and friends did not have.

My participation in the September 1982 demonstrations was a shared experience for me and my grandmother. I had previously joined her in other demonstrations and activities in Nazareth, but they had not included police harassment. My grandfather and grandmother from my father's side used to tell stories about life before 1948, during the British Mandate, the Arab revolt in Palestine (1936-1939),¹⁰ and about the Nakba period. They talked about what happened in Palestine-Israel more generally and about what happened in Nazareth. They explained how in 1948 they both lay in front of the trucks that came to take Nazareth's citizens to the north to the Lebanese border. In this way, they prevented Nazareth's citizens from eviction. We, their grandchildren, were so excited to hear these stories, and after my grandfather passed away in April 1991, we continued to listen to my grandmother's stories, especially those times when she was active while my grandfather was jailed for various political activities. She took his role and did what he was supposed to do for our struggle as Palestinian minority citizens of Israel. She used to conceal guns for the fighters during the British Mandate, and used to distribute in secrecy the party's newspaper, on Tuesdays and Fridays, especially when my grandfather was detained.

She told us about the time that they used to host displaced people from

other villages and towns who came to Nazareth. Some of these were internally displaced, whereas others became refugees in neighbouring Arab countries. Right up to the time of her death, my grandmother refused to allow anyone to video-record her stories, our people's stories. She was concerned about the first generation of Nakba survivors who experienced military rule. The Nakba's memories and stories are combined with fear, loss, violence, humiliation, and insecure feelings (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 9). Isis Nusair has written about her grandmother's and mother's experiences: "both my grandmother and mother related to the year 1948 as a demarcating event in their lives. In 1948, my grandmother's life was turned upside down. My mother would subsequently bear the results of that new situation of poverty and fear of the unknown" (Nusair, "Gendered" 98). Furthermore, many of the second and third generations were born in different circumstances, especially the IDPs who were not born in their original villages. They only have heard their parents' and grandparents' narratives and memories. I know how the passing of time and circumstances can affect the stories told, when I compare my grandmother's recounting of stories ten and twenty years ago from those she told before she passed. It is not an issue of fiction, creation or lies; it is a reflection of the years—losing her husband, sickness, or sometimes simply not talking about the past.

Why Is It important?

In general, the lives of Palestinians have been turned upside down since the Nakba, and women in particular have been impacted upon because the majority of them have lost their property, their lands, their freedom of movement, and their financial security (see Nusair, "Gendered"; "Gendering"; Kassem). The story of Amneh, similar to the stories of many other invisible women, will not be found in history or academic books. After she interviewed her grandmother, on the same evening she passed away, Nusair wrote the following: "The life story of my grandmother, as well as the life stories of the majority of Palestinian women of her generation, will remain absent from the official history books and academic analyses. They are 'invisible and marginalised' whose story does not count. They are the 'reproducers of society,' but not necessarily recorded as the 'makers of history'" (Nusair, "Gendered" 92).

After the Nakba, my grandmother and my research participants, like the rest of the Palestinian women, had to cope with the loss of land and tradition. In particular, they faced the loss of economic resources, which influenced their lives and their self-esteem, and today, most of them still feel deprived of skills and knowledge of land cultivation. The multiple losses and stresses the first-generation women faced led to feelings of insecurity and caused them to develop survival strategies. They needed these strategies to survive the pressures

of being marginalized and being socially, politically, and financially excluded. This marginalization is deeply embedded in structure and practice, and some of the research participants said they still feel isolated and traumatized, especially since they were robbed of their traditional lifestyle without any preparation or replacement skills or support to help them cope with their new lives, and this had a devastating effect on them. After their displacement, the research participants found that they had lost all of the freedom that their living space had afforded. They were also deprived of the safety they experienced within their traditional lifestyle.

My grandmother Amneh used to tell us these stories as well—about how she used to help IDP families who settled in Nazareth, especially in the early stage of their displacement. Amneh used to share her garden's products with them; she used to offer them the garden's shed to store their belongings to make their settling process easier.

As a result of the Nakba, the research participants felt alone and uprooted; they were left to cope with their own feelings of agony and longing. In their previous lives, their physical efforts, knowledge, and contribution to daily life were essential to the family. Most of the research participants expressed their feelings of worthlessness after 1948, and they expressed their longing to return to their previous life and what it offered them.

Andrea Pető and Berteke Waaldijk have written about women's invisibility in official history because it only describes the public sphere, whereas women's history takes place in the private sphere. Women's stories were not visible, and they were not told. These historians aimed to recover women's political agency in history, therefore during their teaching they introduced their students to the methodology of oral history and combined this with assignments to write about the life of a female ancestor. They concludes their experiences as

the foremother stories used in these classes and seminars represent an emotional opportunity to tell a story that might help the participants to think about themselves in different historical terms, and also help them to understand how the national, canonised history taught in the history textbooks is connected to personal histories. (Pető and Waaldijk 20)

This analysis applies to the Palestinian case as well: mother and grandmother are those who pass on the memory of the village origin. They remember Palestinian women through turns of phrase, songs, food preparation, home cures, ways of raising children, stories of the past, and the local dialect.

Finally, for me personally, my grandmother Amneh has been my main source of inspiration in life; she stimulated and fuelled my interest in politics

and feminism. Although she never read any article on these topics—she was an illiterate woman—yet, she taught many the meaning of feminism, women's empowerment, politics, and socialism, as she lived her beliefs and practised them. My grandmother taught me self-confidence, courage, and tolerance. She kept her concern and interest in others, as she kept watching the news and various educational television programs. She used to express her anger when she heard about the deaths of young men and women—Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Libyans, Yemenis, or others.

Amneh's concerns about disadvantaged communities and people affected her sons and daughters who decided to follow their mother and father's way—to be a politically and socially active. Furthermore, my grandmother's stories influenced me strongly, as I decided to choose my public involvement at an early stage of my life, and joined her and my parents for different meetings, activities, and protests. In high school, I helped arrange a protest against Israeli harassment of Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza Strip. My grandmother was very proud of me, and she started telling me more about her days and her different roles, especially in the public space, and how she managed to keep the balance between the public and private roles and duties, something that was not easy at all, especially when my grandfather was in the Israeli jail, or not allowed to work as a result of not gaining a work permit from the authorities. My mother's influence and inspiration on me is bigger than the academic books and articles that I had read; Amneh's stories are the seeds of my adolescent and awareness on social, gender, political and cultural issues around me. Furthermore, Amneh's life story and experiences are a source of pride and self-esteem, and I have since started to pass them onto my own sons

Rest in peace Amneh. I will remember you until my last day.

Endnotes

¹This began in December 1947 and continued until mid-1949. The most terrifying events and massacres were done between 10 March and August 1948, it was named "Plan Dalet." By the end, "close to 800,000 people had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and eleven urban neighbourhoods [had been] emptied of their inhabitants" (Pappe xiii).

²Nihad Boqa'i states the number of internally displaced Palestinians in Israel today is estimated to be around 274,000 persons. This, however, does not include the Bedouins displaced after 1948 in the Naqab; the urban IDPs—e.g., from Haifa and Acre (Akka)—who were permitted to return to their cities of origin but were denied the right to repossess their homes and properties; Palestinians who were transferred after 1949 from outlying village settlements (khirba) to the village proper in the Wadi Ara area; and the Palestinians who remained

in their villages but lost their lands. If all these categories of displaced persons are included, their total number would today exceed 300,000. (74, 105)

³The UNSCR 194 was passed at the 186th plenary meeting on 11 December 1948. The resolution consists of 15 articles, the most quoted of which are: Article 7: protection and free access to the Holy Places; Article 8: demilitarization and UN control over Jerusalem; Article 9: free access to Jerusalem; and Article 11: calls for the return of refugees (for full text, see www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IP%20ARES%20194.pdf).

⁴The Absentee Property Law 5710-1950, Laws of the State of Israel No. 37, was passed in the Israeli Knesset on 20 March 1950. This is the main law in a series of statutes that regulate the treatment of property belonging to Palestinians who left their houses, fled, or were deported during the 1948 War, either within or outside what became the State of Israel. Raja Shehadeh writes that the law referred to “someone who left to go to a country which is in a state of war with Israel” (35).

⁵In 1973, Israel passed an amendment to the absentee law, which was designed to prevent East Jerusalem residents from reclaiming their pre-1948 property in West Jerusalem and designed to prevent IDPs from reasserting their rights to their properties.

⁶The Sabra and Shatila massacre was the mass killing of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians carried out between 16 and 18 September 1982 by the Lebanese Christian Phalange militia with tactical support supplied by Israel under the command of Israeli minister Ariel Sharon, following their leader Bachir Gemayel. The number of victims is estimated to range from 328 to 3,500 (see al-Hout).

⁷The Palestinian citizens of Israel were placed under military rule from 1948 until 1966. This rule prohibited movement outside their villages and towns without a special permit from the minister of defense. Under other clauses of these emergency regulations most of the land was confiscated. These martial laws were originally practised under the British Mandate in Palestine (Kanaaneh 66-6).

⁸Ramadan is the most venerated month of the Islamic calendar, during which Muslims must fast between dawn and sunset.

⁹The war began on 6 June 1982 when Israel invaded southern Lebanon, with the initial goal of destroying the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, except for keeping Shabaa Farms under their rule (Fisk).

¹⁰The Arab revolt in Palestine was an uprising against mass Jewish immigration during the British Mandate of Palestine by Palestinians and small number of Arabs from Iraq, Syria, and Jordan and a few Muslims from India. This revolt

was unsuccessful, but it proved influential for the Nakba events. More than five thousand Palestinians and Arabs were killed, along with four hundred Jews and two hundred Britons. The revolt did not achieve its goal, but it is credited for forcing the issuance of the 1936 white paper, which renounced Britain's intent of creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine as proclaimed in the 1917 Balfour Declaration (Swedenburg).

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