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Interview

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Beyond the Headlines: A Conversation on Palestine, Gender, and the Power of Language

Palestinian writer and political analyst Yara Hawari on how language shapes narratives of violence, the weaponization of gender portrayals, and the “unchilding” of Palestinian children.

A Conversation between [Nimmi Gowrinathan](#) and [Yara Hawari](#) [Share](#) [Tweet](#) [E-mail](#)

Introduction:

Working from the deeper layers of the political stratosphere can be a lonely place. On one of the many long COVID-y afternoons, I switched over from the latest Cuomo briefing to a [Makan](#) hosted discussion on frameworks of liberation for Palestine and beyond. Moving slowly through the mundane mechanics of motherhood (lifting, sorting, wiping) I looked up when I heard the phrase “an attempt to depoliticize Palestinian women”.

These words, from the speaker, Dr. Yara Hawari, created a kind of reverberation in me that settled an increasing sense of isolation. After following her work from afar for many years, we spoke the day after the ceasefire in Gaza came into effect. From my work during the 2009 genocide of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, I understood, intimately, so much of Dr. Hawari’s complex and critical role in the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

The years spent studying and subverting the jargon of scholarship, the public role in the media to dismantle false narratives, the difficult work of pushing the policy world to reckon with the impact of their laws on our people’s lives, and the writing, re-writing, of stories to

stem the loss. Even as we begin speaking, I recognize a familiar distraction of checking local reporting and family WhatsApp updates. She insists that we do the interview anyway.

Nimmi Gowrinathan: I wanted to start with something we are all confronted with. What happens when the Western media gaze turns towards brutalities against our peoples? We know that violence breeds narrative. A narrative that disappears us and releases them from accountability.

In my own thinking on the many concentric circles of captivity that exert pressure on the gendered body, I began to consider the bearings of a weighted circle of narrative on the realization of liberatory desires. In recent conversations with enraged activists from Palestine and Lebanon we were discussing this narrative captivity, which to them felt “esoteric.” Could you share how you make visible the deep and direct impact that narratives of violence have on the bodies of the besieged?

Yara Hawari: This is something I have also struggled to articulate to people in so many different contexts, not just in Palestine. Language has very real material consequences on the ground. One of the most egregious examples of this is the way that Palestinian children are spoken about, a kind of “unchildling” (as Palestinian scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian puts it).

The media will go out of their way to avoid calling Palestinian children, children. Instead, they will call them minors or people under the age of eighteen. I was being interviewed on Sky News at the one-year mark of the genocide in Gaza and just before the interview, a reporter called a four-year-old child who had been shot by Israeli soldiers a “young lady.” You cannot make this up. Today, as we watch the release of Palestinian children from Israeli jails, I am incensed by how they are spoken about.

Nimmi Gowrinathan: The Government of Sri Lanka was never as brazen as the Israeli state, but adopted many of the same narratives, emboldened by Western guarantees of impunity. In the final phases of the genocide in 2009, over 100,000 Tamils were massacred in six months in a “Humanitarian Operation.” I think we draw our struggles closer together for strength but also, for strategy. The pattern is calculated, not a coincidence, to sustain a narrative architecture of oppression.

Yara Hawari: I was thinking about this yesterday. Before another media interview, I was waiting and listening to the program. They interviewed an Israeli mother of a soldier who had

been taken captive on October 7th and I was so shocked by the way that she described him. She said, “My baby boy wasn’t a combat soldier. He worked for COGAT.” COGAT is the coordination body of the Israeli occupation, which she described as delivering humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza.

And the TV presenter repeated that, parroted that line back to her. She said, “This is so awful. You know your son was delivering humanitarian aid to the people in Gaza.” COGAT literally facilitates the illegal occupation of Palestinian land. I was sitting there thinking this is an alternate universe that we seem to be living in—words can be twisted and repeated to make the opposite meaning true.

Nimmi Gowrinathan: It is a feeling that many of us relate to—our own words at times, as you say, “twisted” to fall on one or the other side of a narrative binary, creating a kind of disorienting dissonance. I am thinking of a line from Omar El Akkad’s [new book](#): “*It’s a comforting thing, this narrative, and at my most susceptible to whatever the West is, I want so dearly to partake in it. But it’s a fiction, the most malicious kind: a fiction of moral convenience.*” For me there are two related pillars upholding narrative constructions of dominance: gender and violence. Gender is weaponized in these narrative constructions to justify violence. First, how have you seen gendered imagery evoked in the public discourse on Israel and Palestine?

Yara Hawari: I think you see a lot of distance between the two identities in how motherhood itself is portrayed. Palestinian women are seen as these backwards women who have lots of children, treated as disposable. We constantly see footage of Palestinian women crying and thanking God their child has become a martyr. Completely missing is the context of how religion plays a central role in coping with life under extreme conditions of oppression, and grappling with extreme loss. What gets portrayed is a Palestinian mother breeding towards martyrdom.

Nimmi Gowrinathan: To sacrifice for safety is, of course, integral to every nation. I recently attended the Maaveerar Naal (Heroes Day) of those martyred in the Tamil Tigers, in Sri Lanka. Having walked through the winds and rains of a cyclone, some carrying their children’s favorite foods, the mothers stood for hours to light a candle in their children’s honor. They didn’t speak of an organization, as much as of the desire for liberation that drove their children to fight—the same one that drove them to show up by the thousands. Witnessing this evoked a familiar discomfort around imagery that flattens the political commitments and fuller identities of women into gendered tropes. I wanted to ask you about one of the stranger gender manipulations I’ve seen across several wars, where the humiliation of occupation

happens in a grotesquely sexualized way. This schadenfreude of soldiers parading around in Palestinian women's lingerie. A kind of evil that is closer to revelry than banality?

Yara Hawari: This was so particularly bizarre. I can't even imagine the layers of violation—to be forcibly displaced from your home, and then to see images online of the very soldiers who pushed you out, probably killing family members in the process, rummaging through your intimate things, especially if you're a conservative woman. It's a gross violation. I don't think people realize the ways in which the Israeli settler-colonial project seeps into the most intimate areas of Palestinian life.

Nimmi Gowrinathan: I think there is something particularly dehumanizing in turning genocide into a gendered game. Stylized women state soldiers holding weapons in a phallic position, still frames of sexualized weapons of destruction. The male soldiers mocking and mimicking Palestinian femininity. This also links to the descriptive narratives around *violence itself* that underwrite the empire's agenda. The macro-narratives that allow for a kind of distancing from atrocities. Is a knife held to the throat of a western journalist more intimate than the death of an Afghan bride and her entire family on her wedding day? Violence is always intimate to someone.

Yara Hawari: A lot of things come to mind, on the distancing that justifies violence. US President Obama is considered the darling of liberal circles in the US, but to many other people he was known as the Drone President; his administration killed more people by drone strikes from afar than any other. Similar to the Israeli liberals or leftists who try to defend their service as not actual combat; but the reality is that their work in an office involves pushing a button that is killing someone, somewhere. It's as if person-on-person combat is uncivilized and now the robotic, systemized form perfected by the Israelis is more "civilized." The closer the contact of the violence, the more barbaric. A person sitting utilizing the new technologies of violence is engaged in a more advanced, and therefore justifiable, form of killing.

Nimmi Gowrinathan: Yes, this seems to be how the narrative releases states from accountability for the violence they perpetrate on all of our communities. For the Eelam Tamil community in Sri Lanka, there has been a kind of painful reckoning in this moment. Witnessing the attention and solidarity that we were never able to turn towards Tamil lives in 2009—but also understanding now that the awareness we hoped would stop the bloodshed is something the Palestinian struggle has in fact had, but to no avail. How do you see the impact of this increased activity around the cause of Palestinian liberation, and the difference—as Yasmin El Rifae says— between "articulations and enactments" of solidarity?

Yara Hawari: I think it's important to note that we have had some very important movement wins, like universities divesting from complicity in Israeli apartheid and genocide, and academic groups and associations coming out in support for Palestine. But then you see things like the American History Association whose membership voted to acknowledge scholasticide in Gaza, which was then immediately vetoed by its council. So the wins have also revealed huge structural power imbalances that require seismic shifts for changes to happen long-term.

And so this moment in our history has offered lots of food for thought and self-reflection, as to where solidarity-building goes from here. The deeper ties have been the result of hard work, but some of our own frameworks for solidarity have to be re-imagined. Whilst the crackdown on the solidarity movement has been really intense and continues to be, I do think we are stronger as a movement. And things now are very clear, on who considers genocide a red line.

Nimmi Gowrinathan: Many of us have been re-orienting our work away from what Mohammed El-Kurd calls a “politics of appeal” to the West, and revisiting the historic relationships between liberation struggles across the Global South that were, eventually, fractured by the agendas of empire. Is this a place where the Palestinian movement is turning its political energies?

Yara Hawari: I think for Palestinians, as well, the genocide has been a wake-up call. Much of Palestinian civil society was invested in frameworks of international law and the Western discourse of human rights. The complete impunity offered the Israeli state created a kind of existential crisis within these circles as well. A reminder that Israel is the outpost for American imperialism in the region, and these frameworks were created to ultimately protect Western dominance.

Many of us are grappling with the possibility of a new world order, and there is sometimes this tendency to romanticize the revolutionary relationships and anti-colonial struggles of the 70s in the Global South. And perhaps romanticizing a bit is okay and important for our imaginations. The reality is that there were very strong ideological ties between groups, a sense of everyone being in the fight together, that formed first, before material support. Those relationships do not exist and function in the same way as they did before—and it is important to recognize that the Global South is not homogenous—but there is a space opening for these connections to be revived.

Nimmi Gowrinathan: I think so as well. Some of my recent inquiries into this space involve tracing the literatures and philosophical teachings that shaped the consciousness of women

activists. If we consider that form is responsible for holding intent, why did you choose to write your book, *The Stone House*, as fiction? How did you expect the narratives to travel, and to whom, in this form?

Yara Hawari: I love the practice of oral history. My PhD was actually on oral histories, and I was always interested in it as a methodology. There was a request from a publishing house for me to write something for them that came during COVID; it fell into my lap as a kind of gift. I was able to spend hours on the phone with family members. The book itself is an oral history but there are fictionalized aspects to it. And this artistic license allows you to fill in the details that we, really, may never know. This is the kind of writing that I personally enjoy, because it is easier to digest the heaviness of some of these stories than with a textbook or news article. My next focus is on futurisms and utopias; really harnessing the power of imagination. There is a group of us working on a collection exploring futurism, catapulting our short stories into 2048.

Nimmi Gowrinathan: As this goes to press you are being, again, forced to inject reason into insanity around the empire's ongoing attempts to acquire Palestine.

Yara Hawari: This is very simple. Nobody has discussed Palestinian agency, as if Palestinians are just passive pieces on a chess board. But they are not—they have survived genocide, fifteen months of relentless bombardment and forced starvation. They are determined to stay on their land and I think people underestimate that determination.

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