(Re)Centralising Palestine in Decolonial Feminist Theory

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Last year, when the idea of the Decolonising Knowledge around Gender and Sexuality Conference emerged, we could not think of a better platform than Kohl's to partner with – a journal aiming "to trouble the hegemony of knowledge production." The Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration (CTDC) is informed by our positionality and experience, as Palestinian feminist academic women, its co-founders and co-directors. At the heart of our work, there is a strong commitment to decolonising – not only a decolonising of knowledge but also a decolonising in practice – as a political project. As the personal is the political, our standpoint is one that has been informed by our lived experiences and material realities. However, we took for granted that the mere organising of a conference on decolonisation would neither undermine or overshadow the Palestinian cause, nor silence Palestinians voices. Unfortunately, Palestine was only mentioned towards the end of the conference, only in the context of highlighting the marginalisation of the Palestinian cause within the framing of the event. While the conference aimed to decolonise in essence, the framing of the call for papers and representation within the conference led to the sidelining of Palestine.

As a tool to decolonise, we have called for papers that challenge western academic knowledge production, which leads to the reproduction of "binaries of authenticity/inauthenticity, self/other, core/periphery, and West/East." This challenge has also aimed to undermine "unquestioned, stereotypes one-dimensional images of the queer woman of colour, the Muslim, the vulnerable, the fetishised and the voiceless" – a position that we also adopt due to our belief in the fact that in contemporary times, it is not possible to classify people through identity categories relevant to their backgrounds, lifestyles, cultural heritage, etc. And, in a world characterised by transnationalism, displacement, migration, and hybrid and queer identities, such binaries do not hold ground. In spite of this, this does not mean that binaries in relation to the material realities of the colonised do not exist. Whereas we stand against stereotypes and knowledge produced to satisfy the coloniser's gaze through descriptive research, which singles out some populations as culturally deviant, binaries exist in relation to access to resources. Therefore, a decolonial project, for us, is one that considers both coloniality and colonialism[1] as its archenemies. As both colonising and decolonising are political projects, we stand at two opposing ends: a colonised and a coloniser, in its simplest forms.

The importance of this piece derives above all from the importance of understanding what Angela Davis (2016) describes as "the interrelationships of ideas and processes that seem to be separate and unrelated" (4). Yet, they are central and important for us to be able to move beyond binary identity categories. Our political vision and project relies heavily on "insisting on the connections between struggles" as it is "a feminist process" (Ibid.). For this reason, it is important to (re)centralise Palestine in decolonial feminist theory, as we perceive the Palestinian struggle as both feminist and decolonial. This requires from us an understanding of intersectionality beyond "intersecting identities" (Crenshaw,

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[1] We reject Quijano's (1991, 1993, 1998) distinction between colonialism and coloniality, and we use both terms interchangeably. This distinction usually assumes that colonialism refers to colonial administration or settler colonialism in its materialist sense, while coloniality refers to cultural, racial, sexual, social, and political hegemony represented by the domination of specific populations over others, without an actual colonisation. Our rejection stems from our belief that as long as colonisation exists in its classical form anywhere in the globe, distinguishing between both phenomena leads to a compartmentalisation of struggles, a decentralising of the major settler colonial project in Palestine, and most importantly allows for the formation of decolonial theories that do not take people's material realities into account.

1991), and also prompts us to shift the focus from describing people's lived experience, to identifying and challenging structures of oppression that function globally and that lead to varying experiences and unequal distribution of resources. Yet, one cannot fail to notice that intersectionality, as a framework, has been hijacked to serve the colonial gaze. For example, white feminists' interest in researching the "subalterns" is one that inherited ethnographic and anthropological postures and identifies us as others in opposition to them (Mohanty, 1984). The interest in itself is colonial in its nature and is at odds with intersectional feminist ethics around knowledge production, as it fails to "identify and dismantle" structures of oppression, such as colonialism, in which "racism continues to be embedded" (Davis, 2005: 29). Therefore, the interest in describing people's experiences, or understanding gender dynamics in areas in the world we do not belong to, is colonial in its nature, and is also at odds with intersectional feminist ethics. The only way to move forward with a decolonial feminist project is to adopt an intersectionality that dismantles systems of oppression, rather than works through them.

Decolonising, as a process, prompts us to look into indigenous knowledge, contextualised experiences, and subjectivities – a perspective that has been often adopted by feminist methodologists (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Despite the fact that this had been established decades ago by feminist methodologists and decolonial theorists alike, as Palestinians we often find ourselves justifying our subjective experiences and the knowledge we produce, to both feminists and those claiming to be working towards decolonising knowledge. We also find ourselves in situations, similar to the process of writing this article, localising a global phenomenon. In other words, we are discouraged from building on grand narratives, or in fact theorising, around colonialism, using our voice on its own, as a valid source of knowledge. Instead, we are always pushed back to point zero, where we need to bring in descriptions about our lives to make this voice valid. Our positionality, academic backgrounds, and research histories are not enough on their own. We always need to, as we do here, repeat the same stories thousands of others have shared and expressed before us. In addition to that, we often find ourselves in situations where, to validate our voices when theorising around decolonising, we are pushed to reduce ourselves to our national identities, in ways that single us out, and add to our silencing.

The tone we use is often labelled as "angry" and "patronising," although most of what we say echoes with the works of major feminist and decolonial theorists. On one occasion, an academic at a UK university, who claims to be an intersectional feminist and a pro-Palestine activist, posted a status on Facebook calling us angry Palestinians. Her post followed a panel we spoke at, and during which we rightly called a film "disgusting" and explained its complicity with the Zionist pinkwashing narrative. In her post, she stated that we ruined her experience of watching a beautiful film about gay Palestinians. However, the intersectionality of the Palestinian cause seems to be particularly unsettling, and when Palestinian subjectivities are expressed, they are often dismissed on the bases of lack of objectivity, detachment from reality, and anger, and our knowledge is often deemed as invalid, problematic, and generalising. Epistemologies of the colonised are silenced and veiled, due to processes of colonisation (Mignolo, 2009), and decoloniality as a project aims to centre them. Our methodologies and theoretical frameworks are informed by the intersectionality of our struggle at home. Our epistemology, or the way we know what we know, is centred on our experiences and material realities. Still, when we attempt to produce knowledge at the theoretical level, we get silenced. In fact, we had often been treated within academic institutions as informants, rather than knowledge producers. We feel with Elia (2017), who says that "there are few Palestinian feminists who have not experienced some degree of suspicion,

misunderstanding, or outright hostility, within communities of colour, even feminist communities of colour" (46). A decolonial intersectional feminism does not silence a cause, nor does it silence a subjectivity.

Of equal importance is addressing our own colonised subjectivities. Similar to the colonisation of land, the stealing of resources, and oppression, colonisation has produced a wide range of non-Palestinian colonised subjectivities – some with the aim to counter its effects, and others idealising it, copying its frameworks and silencing others. Spivak (1995) defines epistemic violence as the subjugation of the colonised by the domination of western euro-centric hegemonic imperialism, and as "violence of imperialistic epistemic, social and disciplinary inscription" (27). However, the silencing of our epistemologies, we feel, is, more often than not, also practised by non-westerners, including people in and from Arabic-speaking countries, who either consciously or unconsciously idealise colonisation. For this reason, in Davis' words, "we have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society." For example, one of the latest accusations we have encountered when we spoke about colonisation is being supportive of the Assad regime in Syria, despite the fact that we consider the fight against states and borders one of our major struggles. This accusation has driven its legitimacy mainly from the mere fact that as the Assad regime used to portray itself as a protector of Palestinians rights, to whitewash its crimes, those who are fighting against it went through processes of polarisation – pushing them to associate people speaking against colonisation, and for Palestine in particular, with the tyrannical regime. Even more alarming is the emergence of an anti-Palestinian discourse within some anti-Assad circles, also due to polarisation. We consider these incidents manifestations of colonised subjectivities, as we believe that the main cause of instability in Arabic-speaking countries is Palestine, and that the majority of regimes in the region only exist to protect the Zionist entity.

Similarly, liberal forms of feminism(s) emerging in Arabic-speaking countries are also complicit with Zionism, and we cannot state enough how liberalism is colonialist in essence. Liberal forms of feminism, which push for one-dimensional struggles, such as those aiming to "liberate" the "Arab" woman or promote gender and sexual rights discourses in ways that homogenise women's experiences, without situating them within the social, political, and economic contexts, contribute to the Zionist project in two main distinct ways. First, they rely on the promotion of a victim identity laying the blame on culture, rather than historical processes of colonisation. Second, such forms of feminism reinforce the compartmentalisation of struggles. Elia (2017) provides a great example for this, which we also see happening frequently. She explains how Betty Friedan told a feminist from an Arabic-speaking country before her speech at the 1985 United Nations International Conference on Women in Nairobi: "Please do not bring up Palestine in your speech… this is a women's conference, not a political conference" (as cited in Elia, 48). Intersectionality seems more threatening than any other political standpoint in the case of Palestine. In the majority of our workshops, we noticed, people in Arabic-speaking countries do not realise that a great deal of laws and penal codes imposing restrictions on bodies and sexualities were copied from the French and the British penal codes during times of classical colonisation. Over the past six years, we have held workshops on politicising gender and sexuality in our region for almost 1,000 people. Of them, only five per cent were aware that their countries' penal codes were imposed by colonisation. Liberal feminisms fail to address systems of oppression and reinforce hegemonic discourses of the "colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo, 2011: xxvii). Maintaining the status quo in relation to colonised subjectivities, and unchallenging them is in fact a

colonisers' tool that does not liberate the minds. Their audience is not the colonised and their activism will not change material realities at home, as their language is elitist, inaccessible and reproduces colonisers hegemony over discourses.

This piece aimed to challenge its intended audience by proposing a political project and a political stand-point aiming to decolonise our ways of thinking, intimacies, subjectivities, systems of value, beliefs, being, and becoming. It is a call to self-reflect and to assess the ways through which colonialism has influenced us on the micro and macro levels. Self-reflection allows for the unravelling of "epistemic silences." This self-reflection scrutinises the self inwardly, and allows people to reflect on their own positionality, acknowledge their agency, and understand their relationality vis-à-vis others, whether colonised or colonisers. This piece is informed by our conviction that our audience needs to become more aware and sensitive of and about their own positionalities within the different intersecting socioeconomic and political systems of oppression, in order to pave the way for the production of "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988). We believe that key to transnational feminist struggles is adopting a decolonial intersectional feminist lens – one that does not compromise the coloniser/colonised binary, does not overlook context-specificity, and yet does not reinforce stereotypes and one-dimensional compartmentalisation of struggles. Although we collectively failed to address Palestine during the conference, we call for the (re)centralisation of the Palestinian cause in decolonial feminist theory. With this being a massive project and challenge, our arguments here will always be a work in progress, until our political vision is realised in theory and in practice.

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