

ALONG AN ALTERNATIVE ROAD

WOMEN, RECONCILIATION AND
THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

This Ph.D. thesis explores and documents the relationships existing between some of the foremost bodies of literature within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These are concerned with women's feminist activism as well as with recognition and reconciliation approaches which address ethno-national contexts, and in particular the ongoing status of military occupation. In analysing their interconnections, my aim is to show their relevance to any strategies which have attempted to move beyond the current impasse towards the identification of effective peaceful political alternatives. In the course of this research, I take account of the most significant academic writing relevant to this area, and direct attention to those past and contemporary women's initiatives which have striven to question such a reality.

I underline the Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's role in tackling the major arguments concerning the ways through which diverse forms of ethno-nationalism have obstructed the achievement of recognition and reconciliation in the land of Palestine. In this framework, women's and feminist critical positions have been at the core of socio-political activism, reflecting on alternatives for a meaningful resolution of the conflict. By examining the relevant material and by consideration of the outcomes of my fieldwork (mostly based on semi-structured interviews), I extend my study to both the historic practical examples and the philosophical debates, which seek to deconstruct the founding pillars of both nationalisms.

Based around a critical analysis of the existing feminist literature, my research focuses on exploring viable political tools used by women activists to overcome conflicting ethno-national narratives, as well as to provide innovative approaches and practices applicable to the reconciliation process between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. Considering both parallel and joint women's initiatives, and the internal heterogeneity within each side, my contribution seeks to highlight the importance of engaging with women's and feminist activism in the Palestinian-Israeli background, since it can be seen as one of the few remaining political visions able to challenge the *status quo*. On an academic level, and also within peace-oriented movements, in spite of its difficulties and failures, the women's feminist voice has continued to develop theoretical analyses along with practical approaches of resistance, in its attempt to counter the worsening of the 'normalised' reality in Palestine/Israel.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the most prominent instances of women's political activism in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel over the period starting before the establishment of the Jewish state to the present (late 2011), with a particular focus on the last decade. It seeks to build a matrix linking those diverse examples of women's political actions which have been influenced by and, in the majority of cases, prevented from progressing by the main obstacles associated with Israeli military occupation, with specific regard to their relevance to the paradigms of recognition and reconciliation¹. Considering the fragmented as well as the heterogeneous identities existing in the land of Palestine as starting points for the research, I go on to question the effectiveness of the contributions of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women activists to initiatives aimed at a feasible renewal of the 'peace process', founded on mutual recognition and reconciliation. Evaluating the results of my own fieldwork, I have attempted to collate my findings with case-study analysis of women's political actions directed towards the linkage between their own ethno-national narrative identities and the repression of military occupation, along with the wider feminist theoretical framework.

The academic salience of my study is the provision of an additional contribution to the current debate on the process of making Palestinian and Israeli women activists more visible, and the importance of this process as being one of the most meaningful ways in which to open up areas of enquiry around relevant prospects for the end of the conflict in Palestine/Israel. To trace out the critical political perspectives of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women, as manifested both in separate and joint initiatives, I have selected the questions for use in my field research to enable my study to focus on these four main issues:

¹ By considering these bodies of literature as the core of my research, I will attempt to study examples of activism involving Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women under military occupation, in order to show their influence in the construction of alternative political pathways in the land of Palestine. In this framework, in the central part of the thesis I will particularly base my analysis on the contemporary literature dealing with diverse forms of the politics of recognition and reconciliation connected with the essence of conflict resolution theories.

- a) Whether, and if so in what way, have Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women activists faced and responded to the foremost aspects of ‘feminism(s)’ and ‘ethno-nationalism’ under military occupation in the last ten years (2001-2011).
- b) What has constituted the major point of controversy in relation to the predominant ethno-national narrative identities within both Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women’s movements.
- c) In which way have women political activists involved in such movements been able to confront their internal heterogeneity (mostly based on ethnic and class differences).
- d) Subsequent to the collapse of the most renowned Palestinian-Israeli joint initiatives after the demise of the Oslo Accords, how has contemporary women’s politics² begun to tackle the strengthening of deep-seated ethno-national narrative identities and to move in the direction of an effective reconciliation.

Throughout the dissertation I will pursue these research objectives with the aim of finding interconnections between those historic and current women’s initiatives that have involved attempts to overcome ethno-national boundaries, in particular by means of theories and actions led by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women grassroots activists. Although the women producing these initiatives have continued to represent a minority voice within their own wider groups, most of them have highlighted the recognition and reconciliation paradigm as one of the few viable political tools capable of going beyond ethno-nationalist struggles and of eventually putting an end to the conflict. With this in mind, I have attempted to draw a thread connecting the most common obstacles to such initiatives, and also to examine several instances of failure³ experienced by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women during the historical period under consideration. This examination then moves towards the approaches which have offered alternative prospects to those of the dominant mainstream, and in particular to the most recent

² By means of this expression, I aim at exploring the histories and struggles of the Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women who have been active in their own national backgrounds as well as in joint Palestinian-Israeli political initiatives. In many cases, this activity has constituted one of the most powerful challenges towards the increase of ethno-nationalist narratives in Palestine/Israel.

³ In detail, the majority of women activists I interviewed during my fieldwork have spoken about the ‘failure’ of such joint examples. In my analysis I take account of different interpretations of women’s political involvement as well as of the integration of women’s initiatives into the future prospect of post-occupation societies in the land of Palestine/Israel.

women's political initiatives which have assumed key roles in the reconstruction of an intellectual as well as a political debate on a shared future in the land of Palestine.

In a background where competing ethno-nationalisms have given rise to exclusivist, opposing narratives founded on the dichotomy of 'us' and 'them'⁴, the study of the way through which women activists have recognised or discussed the socio-political impact of ethno-national identities on their own daily reality of military occupation has taken an important place, both in academia and within the grassroots movements. Although women's current political activism⁵ has not always explicitly referred to such a theoretical analysis, I will nevertheless consider this aspect in the following chapters, in which I observe relevant developments throughout the historical period under examination. In looking at a wider historical, philosophical and political pathway in which women activists have tried to develop an influence, I have been concerned with the difficulty of including different socio-political initiatives within the academic debate on feasible alternatives to the mainstream direction and activities of conflict resolution.

By paying attention to both literature and fieldwork, I will consider the two main types of critiques, those arising from the feminist narrative, and those arising from the urge for recognition and reconciliation in conflict resolution theories. I will attempt to reproblematised women's political involvement established on national, ethnic and class divergences among and within Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's movements. This means the examination in detail of the influence of women activists towards each ethno-national agenda, seeing this in relation to their understanding and identification with the feminist discourse. Whilst I will concentrate my attention on the national and social roles played by Palestinian women involved in their self-determination struggle, I will also consider the problematic linkage between feminism(s) and peace politics called into focus by the experiences of Israeli women within their militarised society. Taking into consideration both parallel actions and joint initiatives, I will look at the different strategies and practices through which Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women activists have questioned the opposing expressions of ethno-nationalism, particularly the Zionist

⁴ In relation to this issue, it is necessary to mention the 'paradigm of parity' and the 'paradigm of oppressor-oppressed' that will be described in detail in chapter five.

⁵ My focus will be on what has happened after the failure of the Oslo Accords, starting with the upsurge of the second *Intifadah* in 2000: taking into particular consideration the last decade (2001-2011), I will underline how the vast majority of projects pursued by women activists in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, both those within national schemes and those instigated through joint initiatives, have collapsed. As a consequence, I will try to understand the primary reasons for such a deadlock and report on the possible ways forward proposed in the field.

foundation of the Jewish state and the Palestinian need for self-determination, and the increasing of the Israeli military occupation.

Throughout my dissertation, I aim to provide an analysis of the controversial critical standpoints articulated by the women I interviewed during my fieldwork, in order to better understand their own viewpoints along with their relevance to the internal heterogeneity and divisions they have experienced. In addition, I will report on my study of another subject associated with the challenges of recognition and reconciliation, the Palestinian-Israeli joint women's initiatives. Although the official 'peace process' has not taken yet into account the most significant theoretical considerations or the historic examples of such activities, my study has led me to believe in the importance of women's political and intellectual participation by facing up to the current deadlock. In fact, I believe that whilst the majority of women's initiatives and perspectives have continued to be relegated to the margins of the Israeli-Palestinian political arena, a few of them have succeeded in finding policies and approaches which have assisted them in their commitment to the struggle to end the Israeli military occupation. Following this reasoning, the last section of my research will evidence some of the most successful current cases of women's 'bottom-up' mobilisation related to non-violent resistance and civil disobedience that have attempted to overcome a 'normalised' *status quo* of oppression and inequality.

My analytical framework is mainly based on the existing feminist literature dealing with the rise of strong ethno-nationalisms that have affected the everyday life of women, and, in the Palestinian-Israeli context, the literature relating to the exclusive dichotomy of 'occupier' and 'occupied'. Works including prominent researches conducted by feminist scholars and activists, such as Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin (2002), Cynthia Cockburn (1998, 2007), Tamar Mayer (1994), Simona Sharoni (1995), Nira Yuval-Davis (1997, 1999), have offered particularly valuable theoretical as well as political accounts which have aided the development of my research. By interconnecting personal and collective narratives, their observations have opened noteworthy perspectives which are often in contrast to the male-dominated mainstream. Starting with this comprehensive material, I have extended my study to include an examination of the foremost women political activists' initiatives, with the objective of understanding what potential these might bring both to future theoretical analyses and to the practical policies under discussion on the ground.

I have used excerpts from the interviews I conducted during my fieldwork in order to offer insights into what has occurred in the course of several Palestinian and Israeli women's political initiatives, including what has worked and what has not. In using this material, I seek to highlight the value of studying the relationship between the theoretical references that I will apply throughout the dissertation and their translation into concrete examples of women's political involvement. While some interviewees have still continued with their own struggles (whilst developing an internal criticism towards their past histories and political agendas), most of them have admitted a wide-ranging disillusionment in failing to improve the *status quo*. Stressing the peculiarity of historic instances of both national activism and mutual cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women, I will use a multidisciplinary approach to prove the usefulness of including challenging, and often opposite, viewpoints and to provide diverse frames for the deconstruction of the analysis regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Before enlightening the central topics of each chapter, I need to reflect on the meaning of the key concepts which I will apply to the analytical reflections along with the interrelated cases which I have taken into consideration. In building my theoretical perspective I have adopted the idea that the notion of 'identity' is constructed dialogically⁶ and, thus, mutual recognition between different narrative identities has become the core of those human relationships founded on the necessity of recognising and of being recognised by the 'Other'. During the fieldwork analysis, I will use the term 'identity' to signify the understanding of their own selfhood and their position within their community and within the wider women's movement that the women activists have been able to express and document.

At this point, it is necessary to consider the expression 'narrative identity' in relation to 'ethno-nationalism', since what I call 'ethno-national narrative identity' represents the theoretical basis on which my research is based. Regarding specifically the major contributions given by Charles Taylor (1989) and Paul Ricoeur (1991), the concept of narrative identity refers to the way through which people orient themselves within social relationships by means of strong evaluations (referring mostly to Taylor's

⁶ In this sense, one of the main starting points of modern political theory is based on the debate constructed on the Hegelian phenomenology from which Charles Taylor's earliest works have been developed.

analysis) and by inducing self-interpretation of each one's transformation in the course of their life history (as a focal point of Ricoeur's philosophy)⁷. From this view, narrative identities imply the formation of 'Self' in relation to the others, to specific contexts as well as to changing situations: they define a dynamic process of construction and reconstruction of identities that may involve diverse and contradictory representations.

It is also necessary to introduce a further notion about the conceptual ground of 'ethno-nationalism' at this stage. This ethno-nationalism will be a central theme of the whole dissertation, expressing the most influent sense of a group's self-identity founded on ethnic and kinship features, as has been described by one of the most prominent scholars on nationalism and ethnic conflicts, Walker Connor. Alongside this theoretical concept, Connor has sought to stress the subjective element of his definition of ethno-nationalism, rather than emphasising an objective view (Connor, 1994). In taking into consideration the centrality of the increasing role of ethno-national narratives as a consequence of the main obstacle to peace in Palestine/Israel, that is the Israeli military occupation, the dichotomy centred on the clashing scenario of 'Us' in opposition to 'Others' has become the prevalent frame both at the collective and individual level. As a result, even though a growing analysis of the interrelation among multiple and exclusive identities has been advanced in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, it has involved only the most progressive sides of both societies, and specifically a small minority of peace-oriented people.

In addition, I need to include the literature of conflict resolution and its relation with women's peace mobilisation (along with their connected critiques), with specific reference to the ways through which women activists have attempted to challenge and overcome repression and military occupation in the land of Palestine/Israel. By drawing a deep-seated interconnection among women's struggles, conflict resolution theories, and critical approaches towards the Israeli-Palestinian asymmetrical context, I will attempt to shed light on the main contributions as well as the most problematic challenges concerning what I define as 'women's politics'. With reference to the current feminist peace literature and the numerous critiques of essentialist accounts, I use this expression in order to describe and critically analyse women's actions, experiences, and

⁷ In detail, Charles Taylor affirmed that the central point concerning 'identity narratives' is in "their capacity to confer meaning and substance on people's lives" (1989: 97), while Paul Ricoeur defined them in terms of "the sort of identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function" (1991: 73).

perspectives in the West Bank and within the state of Israel, by articulating women's positions towards the complex reality engendered by the Israeli military occupation.

Within this theoretical background, I have concentrated my research on what has emerged from Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's movements after the collapse of the 'peace process', and in particular of the Oslo Accords. As I will explain more thoroughly in the first chapter with regard to the methodology and method, I have decided to focus on women activists who have either joined in secular women's movements or have been part of joint Palestinian-Israeli women's initiatives. In most of the Middle Eastern societies the term 'feminism(s)' has been interpreted in controversial ways, especially due to the risk of including orientalist and neo-colonial associations, and representing a Western model of women's activism⁸. This is the reason why throughout my research I have not enclosed this issue within strict theoretical boundaries, drawing instead on what women I met during my fieldwork have said whilst reflecting on their plural and fragmented narrative identities.

In pursuing the most problematic questions argued by the internal feminist debate between mainstream intellectuals and grassroots women activists under circumstances such as military occupation and ethno-national conflicts, as can be found within the Palestinian-Israeli context, it has proved very difficult to estimate the political value of those women's alternatives that have challenged such a *status quo*. In the theoretical analysis included within chapter two, I will reflect on the intersection between women's feminist struggles and the military occupation, and consider this alongside the growth of ethno-national collective narrative identities, a development which has introduced what has been defined as 'feminist nationalism', by challenging the mainstream meanings of both feminism(s) and ethno-nationalism.

In setting out the result of my study, I aim to underline the multiplicity of national, ethnic, cultural, kin, class, and political narrative identities that permeate each individual activist by reflecting on the profound differences within and among women's movements in the West Bank and in Israel. To stress contrasting forms of and approaches to each ethno-national narrative identity, together with what I define as 'women's politics', I will underline how Palestinian and Israeli women activists have been involved in two opposing contexts that are, on the one hand, a stateless nation

⁸ Taking into account the degree of controversy which surrounds this debate, I will prefer using the expression 'women's movements', even though I will also deal with 'feminist movements', paying attention to the specific contexts I will refer to. For more on women's and feminist approaches, see chapter two.

along with a leading national liberation movement (Palestinian women), whilst on the other hand, an established nation-state founded on an institutionalised nationalism (Israeli women).

The dissertation is divided into two main sections which consider the active involvement of women in activity related to conflict resolution, and the relationship between these activities and the wider issues relating to the Palestinian-Israeli impasse. Political standpoints which might point towards a way out of the conflict are considered in the light of the increase of repression and of violent ethno-nationalisms engendered by military occupation. In this framework, I will critically examine on the one hand the conventional paradigms of conflict resolution theories, including recognition and reconciliation, and on the other hand some alternative examples challenging such a mainstream, embracing the most prominent political contributions from women which have been produced in response to the escalation of the conflict.

At the start of the dissertation, in chapter one, I will introduce the most significant core of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the military occupation, dealing with the construction of clashing ethno-national identities and their role in developing an increasing number of boundaries acting between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. This will lead on to the main topic concerning women's political activism within conflict contexts and working in the direction of conflict resolution, with consideration of the inclusion and/or rejection of the founding pillars of recognition and reconciliation⁹. In the second half of chapter one, I will describe my analytical approach, drawing from the feminist peace literature along with the main critiques to such accounts, and illustrating the methodology as well as the main method (semi-structured interviews) used during my fieldwork. This field research took place between 2009 and 2011 and involved meetings with more than thirty Palestinian and Israeli women political activists. In chapter two, I will offer a brief summary of the state of the art as regards the major theories on the conflicting linkage between feminist and ethno-national identity, and on women's peace activism as underlined by the foremost feminist literature. In chapters three and four, I will explore the most significant historical and political standpoints of Palestinian and

⁹ Recognition and reconciliation have been considered by the mainstream literature in International Relations and Conflict Resolution fields as fundamental paradigms in defining the main process towards peaceful solutions of ethno-national conflicts. In particular, throughout my work I will question the existing gap between theoretical approaches and the current realities on the ground, considering such issues within the present impasse in Palestine/Israel.

Israeli women activists, with specific attention to their support for alternative socio-political visions. With reference to the Palestinian self-determination struggle and the Zionist foundation of the Jewish state, the analysis will also consider some internal differences and controversial discussions within both women's movements.

Starting a new section of the thesis, in chapter five I will undertake a critical review of the literature and of the foremost Palestinian-Israeli joint examples concerning the paradigms of recognition and reconciliation, with a detailed analysis on women's initiatives. By engaging critically with the main presumptions required to develop an effective end to the conflict, I will also bring attention to the most prominent of the women's 'bottom-up' initiatives applied to the reconciliation processes in Northern Ireland and South Africa. To give unity to my research structure, I will try to consider such joint actions and experiences as similar practices of cooperation between challenging ethno-national narrative identities within an environment of unbalanced power relations. In doing this, I will concentrate my study on the internationally renowned women's joint coalition between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women named the *Jerusalem Link*, underlining the most difficult obstacles they encountered, and above all the perpetuation of the status of asymmetry among 'occupied' and 'occupier' members.

In chapter six, the main aim is to address the political alternatives suggested by women's movements in opposition to the current *status quo*: in bringing to light such socio-political visions I identify the relevance of women's feminist politics both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, through overcoming ethno-national narrative identities and looking towards a shared future, and, in a few exceptional cases in putting forward post-national perspectives. In conclusion, in chapter seven, the final chapter, I attempt to contribute to the present discussion that has begun to recognise the women's feminist view as a feasible political alternative to be considered for a just Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation. In detail, I will take account of the two political practices of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance as successful examples of women's joint struggle contrasting with the violence of ethno-national narratives.

Throughout the dissertation I seek to emphasise the on-going tension between the theoretical prospects I have analysed and the reality in which political strategies and initiatives have taken place. Along this line, I hope to shed further light on the main steps undertaken by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women activists towards a viable

process of recognition and reconciliation, which have involved the challenging, rejecting and overcoming of their ethno-national mainstream identities, and will include consideration of both the tragic outcomes and the successful ones. Using theories together with fieldwork findings, I will try to explore and to question the conventional picture of conflict resolution in the land of Palestine. This consideration has led me to believe that academics and peace activists need to rethink seriously about connecting their analytical approaches more closely with the emergence of some past and current alternatives, starting with women's feminist activism. Within this frame, I do not wish to extend my analysis to the point where I may make broader claims concerning possible solutions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rather I seek to express my view on the necessity of pursuing such a debate, as well as attempting to offer further analytical lenses which can be deployed towards what has been achieved and continues to be aspired to by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women activists. As I will try to show throughout the thesis, considering the alternative prospects provided by women's initiatives as a future political paradigm accepted for inclusion within the controversial puzzle of the Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation process might represent another road to be followed when attempting to move beyond the current impasse.

PART I

ETHNO-NATIONALISM AND WOMEN'S ACTIVISM **FROM A CRITICAL VIEWPOINT**

As suggested in the Introduction, at the present time recognition and reconciliation between Palestinians and Israeli Jews have been moving in diverging rather than converging directions, a trend described by the feminist activist and scholar Daphna Golan: “we have no shared vision of the future, most of us do not believe a shared future is possible and the world colludes with our failure to persevere in the search for justice and reconciliation” (Golan in Rothfield, Fleming, Komesaroff, 2008: 165). Rather than developing trust, as well as transforming relationships into partnerships through reciprocity and mutual cooperation, the current reality seems to be perennially unchangeable.

Considering this contribution as starting point and focusing in detail on women's political activism, the initial assumption of the entire study is that women have fragmented along with heterogeneous identities, and that this might become evident through examining their narratives. Regarding the present Israeli-Palestinian *status quo*, my research will deal with two parallel bodies of literature, the one focusing on the diverse women's approaches towards the increasing of ethno-nationalisms, and the other related to recognition and reconciliation issues within some of the foremost conflict resolution theories (in particular related to the feminist peace background): both suggest significant frameworks indicating a continuous tension between literature and fieldwork as well as past and current histories. By means of theoretical concepts and comparative examples, the core of the analysis aims at exploring Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's critical positions, with regard to both feasible prospects for the end of the conflict and to Palestinian-Israeli joint initiatives, in depth.

In the particular environment created by military occupation, the ongoing feminist academic debate has mostly assumed that women's political involvement performs a key function in confronting the restrictions of socio-political activism in conflict areas. Since the 1980s, feminist scholars have contributed to this field by producing interdisciplinary works that have been able to move beyond traditional social constructions in order to problematise women's perspectives and initiatives, in

connection with their own different, and often contrasting, narrative identities based on nationality, ethnicity, and class. My research intends to expand and, at the same time, to challenge some of the most accepted ideas that have become the foundation of the existing feminist literature. In particular, it will deal with the ways through which women's politics has reflected on its relevance to the 'peace process' and on a meaningful conflict resolution established on the basis of mutual recognition and reconciliation. In the context of my investigation, I will found my analysis on the main feminist literature, starting with Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), Nancy Fraser (2000), Ange-Marie Hancock (2007), Leslie McCall (2004), and Iris M. Young (1990)¹⁰. Furthermore, in detail, I will take account of references to the broad feminist peace literature in relation to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, along with some more recent criticism, by including the inspiring works by Cynthia Cockburn (1998, 2007), Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin (2002), Tamar Mayer (1995), Sophie Richter-Devroe (2009), and Simona Sharoni (1993, 1995, 2006).

To pursue these research objectives, the following study concentrates on women's movements both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, examining their understandings and concrete political strategies with a view to enabling the suggestion of alternative reflections on conflict resolution. In representing minority voices in their national collectivities, most women activists have faced up to dynamic relationships concerning interwoven identities within their problematic realities. In this sense, the current research proposes highlighting whether women have attempted to share further political perspectives with the purpose of dismantling the dehumanised condition of the 'Other', usually considered nothing but an enemy within a context of military occupation, and the way in which they have sought to accomplish this¹¹. Although feminist activism and women's studies¹² have increasingly created

¹⁰ These issues and their relation to the concept of 'intersectionality' will be dealt with in greater depth in Part II, in terms of the theoretical basis of Palestinian-Israeli women's joint initiatives.

¹¹ What happened in the last decade has mainly demonstrated that one of the most challenging difficulties of the impasse among women political activists has been their inability to deconstruct the dominant nationalist narrative identities (especially regarding Zionism within the Israeli Jewish women's movement) in relation to the increasing effects of the Israeli military occupation. This crucial topic will be discussed throughout the entire dissertation.

¹² The earliest feminist literature considered only the category of 'women', especially their involvement as social actors in the representation of national processes. Later on, by the end of 1970s, the meaning of 'gender' started to emerge regarding power relationships between masculine and feminine identities. As social construction, 'gender' has been at the centre of numerous feminist studies by underlining different societal interactions. An understanding of this as a combination of multiple and shifting identities within power dynamics is founded on both individual and collective levels: each woman changes her own positioning in respect of social relations.

approaches which have had the potential to impact on conflict resolution theories, the reality on the ground in Palestine/Israel has obstructed feminist theoretical notions, preventing them from being contextualised into feasible proposals of alternative politics.

By tracing out the essential framework of the paralysed *status quo*, the first chapter will describe processes that have both constructed and characterised Palestinian as well as Israeli Jewish ethno-national identities in the last few decades in consequence of the further escalation of military occupation. Throughout a constant flow between theoretical patterns and field realities (in the current time and also in the past), I will explain why the research has focused on women-only secular movements, using semi-structured interviews with Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women that took place between 2009 and 2011. Moving into a more comprehensive discourse and leading towards the central focus of the dissertation, chapter two has the objective of underlining the inextricable linkage between alternative political approaches to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict suggested by women's movements (including their controversial perspectives relating to military occupation) and the diverse forms of interpreting and practicing ethno-nationalism which are in evidence. Although these paradigms have often reflected contradictory terms, they have been fundamental in the role played by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women in shaping the values of their own communities and, at the same time, in deconstructing deep-rooted national identities. By drawing parallel analyses of Palestinian and Israeli women's movements from their historical and political standpoints, chapters three and four will deal with ethno-national components in a structural condition of military occupation (with specific reference to the Zionist foundation of the Jewish state and the Palestinian self-determination struggle) and their conflicting interrelations with regard to women's narrative identities.

In this way, the dissertation will continue by critically analysing whether recognition and reconciliation can be represented in terms of viable political tools required to overcome ethno-nationalist struggles and to put an end to the conflict. In considering such an issue, alternative examples of Palestinian-Israeli joint activism have given rise to renewed ideas of a common future between Palestinians and Israeli Jews,

In the following chapters the analysis will emphasise the main feminist theories, in particular their interpretations concerning ethno-national issues and feasible resolutions of the conflict. As I am going to explain more in detail in the methodological section, I use both the expression 'women's movements' and 'feminist movements' with the awareness of their different understanding within the majority of Middle Eastern contexts.

above all the most prominent women's joint project named as *Jerusalem Link*. In significant experiences, the reality of women's activism, which has been based both on theoretical and grassroots principles, has challenged nationalist drifts and boundaries. Although most of such women's political initiatives have been aware of the importance of the above-mentioned paradigms of recognition and reconciliation, they have not achieved their initial purposes in the last few years, as will be shown more in detail in Part II. As a matter of fact, they have not been able to create influential alternatives to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and this could be a reason why at the present time some of them are going through the process of deconstructing and reconstructing their political strategy, a development which will be examined in the final section of the dissertation.

CHAPTER ONE

CHALLENGES TO PARALLEL REALITIES AMONG PALESTINIAN AND ISRAELI JEWISH NARRATIVES

1. Narrating Identities in Contemporary Palestine/Israel

In the following paragraph I will start by addressing the indissoluble relationship between the Palestinian and Israeli Jewish national identities. These identities have been jointly established on the basis of conflicting interpretations of historical experiences at both the individual and the collective level. In considering historical narratives as frames through which people look at themselves, as well as at the so-called ‘Other’, each narrative portrays divergences and assumptions that may limit the possibility of a truly shared process of recognition and reconciliation. As narratives interact, the exclusivism of opposite narratives may attempt to eliminate or deny an individual’s ethno-national identity. In general, the history of the other side has often shaped either hostile or intertwined narratives regarding collective past tragedies. Taking account of the conflicting aspects of ethno-national identity, I will examine the most critical perspectives that have represented crucial starting points for the debate on conflict resolution, and in particular those arising within women’s political agendas which have been aimed towards a successful approach to the reconciliation process. Considering women’s activism in their own collectivities as well as in joint initiatives, the following analysis will question whether such women’s political engagements could represent the introduction of a potential for change into the regional political arena, going beyond ethno-national claims, struggles, and bringing to an end the military occupation.

1.1. Historical and Current Opposite Re-Narrations

Building on Virginia Tilley’s view that the Palestinians and the Israeli Jews have determined ‘mytho-histories’, in the sense of “not false history but a strategic and romanticized reading of historical events to suit later political agendas” (Tilley, 2005: 149), the analysis throughout this dissertation will be founded on the significance of

historical and national narrative identities that have become even more strongly reinforced in the last decade. As illustrated by the social psychologists Daniel Bar-Tal and Gavriel Salomon, collective memories do not commonly describe a ‘true history’, rather a selective and biased past that may be shared by each group member in order to justify one’s own position (often victimised) and to delegitimise the opponent side (Bar-Tal and Salomon in Rotberg, 2006: 19-45). For instance, within the Palestinian-Israeli context, both the concept of mythical homeland for the Israeli Jews and, on the other hand, the issue of the Right of Return of the native Palestinians have consolidated societal control in the light of divergent belief systems. In such a framework, the *status quo* has reinforced humiliation and hopelessness towards the weakest people, without thinking about possible strategies of re-narration in each side and in the possible creation of a joint pathway¹³.

By taking for granted that each party involved in the conflict believes strongly in its own interpretation of history through a deep sense of victimization, a further preliminary element to be considered is the unequal power-relation in the breakdown of basic truth and historic responsibilities. Clashing narratives among perpetrators and victims cannot be put at the same level, nor can they bear an equal moral weight. In situations such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the asymmetry between the ‘occupier’ and the ‘occupied’ has become influent in relation to the responsibility issue, in addition to having moral, legal, and political implications inside each society. Nevertheless, in such a frame, the above-mentioned Bar-Tal and Salomon have based their approach on the ‘paradigm of parity’, which does not take into account the question related to the current power asymmetry in the conflict¹⁴.

While this debate has attempted to build up a dialectical interaction, the ongoing military occupation has engendered a dynamic of repression and resistance. As already stressed, such a conflict is strictly linked to the past suffering of both peoples (the Holocaust for the Israeli Jews and the *Nakba* for the Palestinians), moving the parties towards the denial of the ‘Other’. In fact, the destruction of collective memories has not only been a political tool used by opposite ethno-national narratives, but has also

¹³ Historical cooperation between Palestinian Arab and Jewish women during the British Mandate will be described in the central part of the dissertation, as one of the earliest examples for future bi-national visions. In this way, the analysis will highlight political transformations that took place in conjunction with the establishment of the state of Israel, a development which is considered to be the turning point for the complete downfall of a joint socio-political entity for both peoples.

¹⁴ Concerning a deeper analysis of the ‘paradigm of parity’ and the ‘paradigm of oppressor-oppressed’ see chapter five.

reflected the persisting willingness of each party to be considered as the unique victim in the conflict (Gur-Ze'ev and Pappé, 2003)¹⁵.

1.2. *Towards Victimhood of 'Other'*

Looking into the dimensions of 'victims-versus-victims' and 'right-versus-right' (Caplan, 2010: 50-51), each conflicting side perceives itself in terms of being the victim of the 'Other'. Consequently, when considering theoretical and political approaches to conflict resolution, identity issues need to be taken account of as a possible root cause. This approach is distinct from that based on the concept of settler colonialism, an analysis of the conflict that will be discussed in the next sub-section. The intertwined connections between historic tragedies and their reciprocal sense of victimhood may become crucial features in recognising others' pains. In this way, national narrative identities, which are usually considered in opposition, need to focus on the concept of recognition of each position, moving beyond the common standard of each party considering itself more victimised than the 'Other'. Such a standpoint does not mean one party denying either their own narratives or historical trauma, rather it means attempting to discover mutual interactions between each other within collective memory¹⁶. In fact, on the one hand, the political as well as moral responsibility during the *Nakba*, which created the Palestinian refugee question, and on the other hand, the deep-seated fear of losing their ethno-national identity among the majority of Arab countries represent the two main obstacles experienced by the Israeli Jews when considering moves in the direction of recognition and reconciliation.

From the theoretical level to the political field, a crucial step would be based on re-conceptualising the notion of territory, especially in relation to the Palestinian disposessions and evictions caused by the Zionist politics founded on 'a state without a people for a people without a state'. As the historian Ilan Pappé has elaborated in detail

¹⁵ By the end of the essay, it has become clear that Gur-Ze'ev accepts the 'paradigm of parity', whilst Pappé does not. As suggested in the previous note, for more details see chapter five.

¹⁶ This is one of the main aims of the Israeli grassroots organisation *Zochrot* (that means 'they remember') that organises public initiatives, demonstrations and, above all, tours in the *ex* Palestinian villages destroyed during the *Nakba*. They have the object of making Palestinian suffering and losses known to the Israeli Jewish common people. Nevertheless, the scholar and activist Ronit Lentin has expressed critical thinking about this experience in her latest book *Co-Memory and Melancholia: Israelis Memorialising the Palestinian Nakba* (2010). She has questioned whether similar examples represent the necessity of self-healing for Israeli Jews, rather than looking for a real justice for Palestinians.

throughout his analyses, within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the concept of victimhood may be divided in *pre-1967*, when Israeli Jews were considered the only victims due to the temporal proximity to the Holocaust, and *post-1967*, the time when Palestinians started to be regarded as victims as well. Such a periodization has been central in order to justify the Zionist project in Palestine, and to obscure completely the ‘1948 ethnic cleansing’¹⁷. Indeed, it meant “the destruction of 400 Palestinian villages and neighbourhoods, the expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians and the massacre of several thousand Palestinians” (Pappé, 2003: 229).

Another correlated and contradictory concept has been proposed by the vice Mayor of Jerusalem in the 1970s, Meron Benvenisti, as ‘separation but with equal conditions’ by covering what happened in 1948 as well as in 1967 to make the ‘Other’ Palestinian invisible. Since the beginning of the conflict, each collectivity has tried to produce selective narratives in which only an apparent egalitarian status has been promoted among all the communities who live in that land, rather than legitimising each historical ‘truth’. As the scholar Robert Rotberg has defined in terms of ‘double helix’ (2006), both Palestinians and Israeli Jews have persisted in manipulating their past in accordance with the current reality and their own interests.

Symbolic and physical divisions have characterised a constant political denial of the ‘Other’ within a military occupation context based on opposite narratives: self-critiques towards ethno-nationalist identities in relation to the prolonged effects on the *status quo* have been removed from the majority of public debates. Among a number of academic studies, the historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin has illustrated the internal Israeli Jewish ‘supplementary dimension of denial of the exile’ (2007: 96), through which the oppression of the ‘Other’ has meant exclusion of collective conscience, denial of historical memory and traditions of the oppressed people. As a result of such a background, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has continued to be observed as irreconcilable, absolute, intractable, and confined to remaining unresolved and in a permanent deadlock.

In opposition to the exclusivity of each identity, one of the main challenges has been the advocating of a mutual recognition able to reformulate past collective

¹⁷ What happened in 1948 has continued to be at the core of both ethno-national narratives. On the one hand, for the Palestinian people 1948 symbolises their own memory and right of self-determination, on the other hand the Israeli Jews have completely denied it so as to remain the ultimate victims in modern history.

narratives¹⁸. The recognition and reconciliation process, as one of the possible approaches to conflict resolution, might put forward the creation of mutual interactions among different representations of legitimate narratives by listening to the ‘Other’ and understanding opposite requests. After decades of conflict and in spite of powerful boundaries among ethno-national identities, the necessity of focusing on reciprocity between clashing collectivities could enable each party to move forward through reconstructing their own narrative.

Along these preliminary lines of the analysis connected with one of the potential conflict resolution strategies (and also its main critiques) that will be examined in more detail in the central part of the thesis, and referring to the specific case of the Israeli society, the anthropologist Rebecca Torstrick has explained that “if we accept a vision of identity as a tensed ‘Both/And’, then we must reject characterizations of intergroup interactions that reduce the identities of the actors involved to simple dichotomies” (Torstrick, 2000: 26). As an initial stage towards the entire research, it has become necessary to bear in mind the complexity of this dichotomy since my argument will aim at studying the political role of Palestinian and Israeli women activists who have been surrounded by such a socio-political context.

1.3. The Settler Colonial Framework

At this point of the introductory section, in order to give a more detailed prospect regarding my theoretical framework as well as the context for the following analysis of feasible political alternatives through which women activists have attempted to build up and have continued to struggle both in the West Bank and in Israel, I will need to clarify the meaning of what has been defined as ‘settler colonialism’ in Palestine/Israel. This has been delineated as one of the most controversial subjects at the core of numerous debates among academics as well as political activists throughout the world concerning the relationship between Zionism as a colonialist movement and the Palestinian anti-colonialist struggle. In addition, as a frame of analysis, it is significant

¹⁸ Starting with this outlook, a project called ‘Shared Histories’ has been developed by Palestinian and Israeli academics, journalists, political activists, through a series of meetings in Cyprus and Jerusalem in the spring and summer of 2002. It dealt with sharing knowledge and understanding about each narrative identity and historical memory towards the ‘Other’. See in detail *Shared Histories: a Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue* (Scham, Salem, and Pogrund, 2005).

to understand how land represents a gendered concept, in the sense that it has played a central role in Palestinian political activism as well as in Israeli policies, and in particular in relation to the inclusion/exclusion of women from the historical and political contexts.

Starting with the scholar Maxime Rodinson's *Israel: a Colonial-Settler State?* (1973), the description of Zionism as a form of settler colonialism¹⁹ has grown in the sense of legitimising the large number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine, considered their native historical land. By analysing its connections and divergences with the other most recognised practices of European colonialism, Rodinson was one of the first Jewish intellectuals (after the establishment of the Jewish state) who criticised the Zionist policy that has followed the 1967 war and the occupation of the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In addition, he advised how

“wanting to create a purely Jewish, or predominantly Jewish, state in an Arab Palestine in the twentieth century could not help but lead to a colonial-type situation and to the development (completely normal, sociologically speaking) of a racist state of mind, and in the final analysis to a military confrontation between the two ethnic groups” (Rodinson 1973: 77).

In this direction, settler colonialism may be considered one of the most appropriate theoretical lenses with which to explore the establishment of the Zionist ideology into the Jewish state of Israel and its consequences towards the entire Middle Eastern region. In a parallel way, throughout my research I have needed to consider the theories both on settler colonialism and those on conflict resolution (especially the one founded on dialogue approaches aiming at overcoming ethno-national narrative identities towards the ultimate goals of recognition and reconciliation). On the other hand, since I strongly believe in the importance of stressing historical and political roots of the conflict, I have found it necessary to critically discuss the foremost bodies of literature that have advocated conflict resolution theories without taking strongly into consideration the material context of the conflict, and in particular the asymmetric status of power relations between the ‘occupier’ and the ‘occupied’. This means founding my structural analysis on the starting point that the Israeli military occupation, as the direct consequence of the ongoing settler colonialism on the Palestinian

¹⁹ Such a definition has underlined the main difference with classical colonialism: settlers usually come to stay and they want native people to disappear from their lands. More analyses of this issue and its different perspectives are available at <URL:<http://settlercolonialstudies.org>>

territories, has continued to represent the main obstacle to a just conflict resolution and to a common joint future for all citizens living in that land.

In supporting this standpoint, and in calling attention to the key theoretical as well as political assessments about settler colonialism, I take account of some prominent academics who have given interpretations about the question of whether or not Zionism has been a form of colonialism, by drawing different colonial models to interpret the development of the Jewish state in the land of Palestine. In opposition to the prevalent Israeli discourse, a number of Israeli Jewish social scientists as well as historians have examined complicated representations of power-relation within the exclusivist Zionist perspective. Among them, Baruch Kimmerling (1983) and Gershon Shafir (1989) have tried to explain such a process of settlement by utilising comparisons with other colonial histories. While the former has critically underlined how the widespread legitimisation of Zionism has been provided by the Israeli society, the latter has explored much more the economic dimensions within the Zionist politics of settlement.

Referring to the settler colonialist nature of Zionism, the historian Gabriel Piterberg has stressed the significance of studying settler colonialism in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, since it has been founded on three main factors of hegemonic settler narratives. These are the exceptionality of each settler nation, the exclusiveness of settlers' subjectivity, and the rejection of recognising the presence of the colonised people along with the subsequent colonization of the settler societies. Using such a theory, he has tried to apply it to the Palestine/Israel case, affirming that:

“its three fundamentals accordingly are: the alleged uniqueness of the Jewish nation in its relentless search for sovereignty in the biblically endowed homeland; the privileging of the consciousness of Zionist settlers at the expense of the colonized, and at the expense of the results of colonization by the settlers rather than their intentions; and the denial of the fact that the presence of the Palestinian Arabs on the land destined for colonization was the single most significant factor that determined the shape taken by the settlers' nation” (Piterberg, 2008: 62).

Since Zionism has become one of the most acute forms of settler colonialism, a further challenging analysis has proposed four other features that have drawn attention to the building process of the Israeli enclave: the principle of population transfer, the simultaneous independence from and dependence on the West, the expansionist nature,

and the internal ethnic and cultural heterogeneity (Elmessiri, 1977: 101-108). In order to ‘normalise’ the Jewish people in a Jewish society within an independent territory the state of Israel has emerged through the formula of settler colonialism, which has meant the formation of exclusivist policies against minorities living in the land of Palestine/Israel. Such a project has enabled the Jewish state to create a legalised system of discriminations and inequalities that have been embedded in different forms of hierarchies, starting with nationality, ethnicity, social class, and gender.

Moreover, such a settlement process may be differentiated from other similar settler-society contexts, especially regarding the relationship between settlers and indigenous people. The Israeli settler society has not been constructed simply in terms of a new homeland; rather it has been founded on the myth of a common origin. As suggested by the feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis:

“ignoring or marginalizing the construction of Israel as a settler society, with its own specific characteristics, prevents most Israelis, both emotionally and analytically, from understanding some epistemological and ontological aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [...] Such an understanding is vital for any possible transversal dialogue between the conflicting sides that goes beyond the manipulative simulation games of conflict resolution models that have occupied such a central place in the Oslo negotiations in a most ‘post-modernist’ manner” (Yuval-Davis in Nimni, 2003: 191-193).

In continuing along such a pathway, dominant Zionist foundational myths, which have represented basic values of the Israeli society, should be questioned by alternative political and historical narratives. This is an approach that I will explore in subsequent chapters in order to provide a critique to those conflict resolution models that have avoided dealing with material contexts on the ground. In this sense, a political prerequisite of rereading the Zionist project is related to the problematising of the ethno-national issue, and in particular to the way in which Zionists, as both settler colonial movement and state, have oppressed, exploited and excluded the native Palestinian population.

Such considerations have been required to interpret the whole thesis, especially focusing on the women’s critical feminist perspective that has searched for multiple political alternatives to the present reality in order to decolonise the ‘occupier/occupied’ *status quo* in the direction of a just conflict resolution. Furthermore, the last part of the thesis will deal with political alternatives in order to overcome the politics of Zionism

as a colonialist movement and to call for the recognition of Palestinian rights as the basis for a future peaceful resolution of the conflict. In this sense, the interviews conducted during my fieldwork will highlight the centrality of the question and its feasible way to recognise and go beyond such a settler-colonial setting. Even though the majority of Israeli society has continued to be reluctant to confront such a complex matter, theoretical reflections have started to formulate alternative critiques to the Zionist mainstream.

1.4. A Real Peace Involvement?

I need to introduce a brief overview of the general status of peace-oriented backgrounds (especially in Israel) in order to analyse women's peace and feminist movements in the next chapters. In numerous cases, responses from women I interviewed have attempted to link their political activism with their theoretical knowledge. This is one of the main reasons why I have decided to combine the strictly theoretical part of the thesis with the contents of the interviews I conducted during my fieldwork. Although major efforts have largely failed and have been criticised during the last decade (as I will illustrate in the following chapters), a number of grassroots as well as institutional initiatives have taken place and have been organised by the main peace groups of both societies, rather than by leading decision-makers (Hermann in Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004: 49-59).

Concerning the 'peace camp', the most relevant politics has supported what has been labelled as 'sustained dialogue' in which meetings between Israeli Jews and Palestinians have striven to implement beliefs and opportunities to know the 'Other'²⁰; while, the 'institutional peace work' has defined a more controversial example since it has not equally involved both sides in the political strategies. Such a background has shown the complexity of interlinking theoretical and practical levels, along with the purpose of taking into consideration injuries perpetrated by the dominant side, as well as reparations for the victims.

²⁰ In the central part of the dissertation, the analysis will critically reflect on Palestinian-Israeli joint women's initiatives as 'dialogue groups' (in particular, consideration will be focused on the *Jerusalem Link*).

The so-called ‘peace process’ is in a deadlock: on the one hand the Israeli establishment has succeeded in systematically denying fundamental conditions for a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, on the other hand Palestinians are divided physically and politically without a real and completely recognised leadership. In addition, the international community has continued not to achieve a feasible change of the *status quo* in order to force the Israeli government to accept international law and the minimal prerequisites to restart once again a pathway in the direction of a peaceful and fair solution of the conflict²¹. For this reason, the asymmetry of power-relations between the ‘occupied’ and the ‘occupier’ has represented one of the deepest of the gaps between Palestinians and Israeli Jews that have prevented a common future, and, as a consequence, a fair conflict resolution focusing on the historical and political root causes of the conflict. The main discussion of this problem is included within Part II.

Accordingly, with a comprehensive approach towards critical reconciliation, the concept of ‘bridging narratives’ has been advocated by post-Zionist Israeli scholars²² as the political means through which each specific situation influences alternative identity politics and its related issues of power and knowledge (Pappé in Rotberg, 2006: 194-204). From this perspective, the reconciliation paradigm may need to reach collective changes in the interpretation of historical narratives along with their mutual attitudes in relation to the ‘Other’. In this way, social justice based on egalitarian roots becomes essential in restructuring relationships within individual as well as national frameworks.

At the same time, historical responsibilities cannot be sketched out only by one side; on the contrary, the idea of eternal ‘truth’ and unbalanced interactions should be removed. By rejecting the denial of the ‘Other’ (also expressed in terms of indifference towards the enemy), I will seek to found my research on the account of the few but significant experiences of Arab-Jewish joint realities and intellectual debates since the late 1920s that have started to put forward suggestions for everyday actions of cooperation between Palestinian Arabs and Jews²³. As Albert Einstein wrote regarding

²¹ Among a number of interesting publications, the failure of ‘peace’ negotiations has been described in detail in the collective volume entitled *Where Now for Palestine: the Demise of the Two-State Solution* (Hilal, 2007).

²² This definition identifies Israeli academics, mainly social scientists, who have proposed innovative researches in the late 1980s, questioning the milestones of the establishment of the state of Israel and exploring the consequences of such events with regard to the Palestinian people. Among them, the so-called ‘New Historians’ (starting with Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim) have challenged the Zionist *milhemet ha-atzama’ut* (War of Independence) narrative of 1948.

²³ In particular, the core of the following analysis will deal with challenging political projects and intellectuals’ thoughts led by women activists who have attempted to draw alternative peaceful pathways among Palestinians and Israeli Jews.

the tragedy of Palestine at that time: “friction is perhaps inevitable, but its evil consequences must be overcome by organised co-operation, so that the inflammable material may not be piled up to the point of danger” (Einstein, 1930: 51). From this standpoint, a general awareness concerning interconnected narrative identities may highlight a deep-seated challenge between theoretical assumptions and current reality that could point out alternative options for the resolution of the conflict, although this thinking is still rather marginal in the contemporary political background.

2. Methodological Considerations: a Feminist Approach

In connecting the theoretical level at which I will consider the main issues presented by the current feminist literature, and include an analytical reflection resulting from my personal experience in the field, the following paragraph will attempt to justify the research itself, and my position within a context-specific approach. In particular, I will use the existing feminist perspective concerning the shift from a focus on dialogue (mostly informed by literatures on recognition and reconciliation) to a focus on solidarity (specifically informed by literatures on non-violent resistance) as my central conceptual framework. This framework is built on challenging hierarchic models of knowledge, and aims to recognise the linkages between political, theoretical, and methodological overviews.

Since the feminist literature has increasingly adopted multidisciplinary perspectives, I have decided to assign the greatest relevance to those instances of women’s political activism that have been engaged in ethno-nationalist conflict contexts through academic arguments and everyday struggles. Current accounts dealing with the themes of women’s movements in the occupied Palestinian territories as well as inside the Jewish state of Israel have represented a wide-range and complex starting point from which to explore the linkage between theory and practice to relate women’s experiences concerning their political involvement.

As I have already stated in the Introduction, I will try throughout the thesis to answer these four main questions:

- a) whether and how have Palestinian as well as Israeli Jewish women activists changed their perspectives concerning the relationship between feminism, ethno-nationalism, and military occupation after the demise of the Oslo Accords;
- b) what have the major arguments and differences been in relation to the ethno-national identity within Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's movements;
- c) in which way have women activists dealt with their internal heterogeneity;
- d) subsequent to the collapse of the most well-known Palestinian-Israeli joint initiatives, how has women's activism attempted to face the ongoing Israeli military occupation, which has caused the increasing of deep-seated ethno-national narrative identities, and to move in the direction of a meaningful and fair reconciliation.

2.1. The Methodological Approach and Its Conceptual Framework

I have learned about significant aspects of fieldwork from Julie Peetet's explanation (summarised by her in the following quotation) and by relating this to my own experience both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel:

“as we shall see, Palestinian women had a specific intent when participating in researching or talking to outsiders. The women I worked with viewed me as a foreigner to whom by telling their story they would be conveying it to the West. To them the ethnographic research experience was an experience in dialogue in international politics” (Peetet, 1991: 16).

As a researcher and woman involved academically, politically and emotionally within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict context, since the beginning I have needed to reflect on my own positionality. Taking part in several solidarity initiatives towards the oppressed condition of Palestinians under military occupation in the West Bank (in particular in those organised by the Palestinian non-violent resistance movement together with Israeli and worldwide peace activists), inside the state of Israel, and at the international level, I have not faced specific controversial discussions with my interviewees. A few exceptions have taken place with some Israeli Jewish women activists when I have tried to question more on their internal division and its relation with the political consequences connected to the ongoing military occupation. By being

aware of the importance of self-reflexive feminist practices in doing an ethically responsible research, I am indebted to the following statement by the academic Daphne Patai who wrote:

“because ‘women’, gender notwithstanding, are not a monolithic block, ethical questions about our actions and implications of those actions are especially appropriate if such research is [to become] for women and not merely by or about them” (Patai in Gluck and Patai, 1991: 205).

During my bibliographic research as well as in the course of my fieldwork, I have tried to internalise such a position in order to be aware of the necessity of a constant process of redefining and reinterpreting women’s political commitment within and between different ethno-national drifts. Focusing on the historical and political root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that have created an asymmetric *status quo* between the ‘occupied’ and the ‘occupier’²⁴, I have been interested in researching on the practices and politics used by women activists to resist and to change discriminatory and oppressive structural conditions. In doing this, I have come across the demanding question of an ethic of engagement in the fieldwork, and in particular by identifying, placing and defending my positionality, as well as my relationship to the research and its subjects. Being a crucial basis of my contribution to these academic debates, I have needed to pay close attention to the feminist claims about the strict linkage between my position as outsider researcher and the women I have studied, in order to set up an egalitarian research process, as I will explain in the next sub-paragraph.

Since the beginning of such a research process, on the one hand I have taken into account the most valuable feminist literature dealing with war and conflict resolution, with specific attention to ethno-national narrative identities and their obstacles towards a relevant political pathway of recognition and reconciliation. On the other hand, this topic has led to an additional aspect of my fieldwork, which has been to investigate whether it is possible to verify that a few women activists have started to react to and to question the theoretical feminist critique itself. This has meant that a further challenge of the following research is based on the analysis of internal contradictions as well as divergences existing between women’s experiences and perspectives, including the

²⁴ In this way, I underline how the increase of ethno-national narratives can be analysed as one of the foremost symptoms of the lasting military occupation.

roles of class position and national background in the way in which the women live out their everyday lives.

Starting with the concept of ‘matrix of domination’ by Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and considering other renowned feminist theories such as the ‘multidimensional’ standpoint proposed by Nancy Naples (2003) and the expression of ‘multiple consciousness’ given by Mari Matsuda (1996), I would like to give voice to the complexity of viewpoints and positions that I received from women interviewees (who are involved in multiple and contradictory identities) and that can be associated with the current system of oppression and domination. In the specificity of analyses on women’s political mobilisation within conflict contexts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian one, a key concern has regarded how women have been involved in the interconnected narratives of feminist and peace activism.

Basing my research on the foremost texts by Cynthia Cockburn (1998, 2007), Cynthia Enloe (1990, 2000), Sophie Richter-Devroe (2008, 2009), Simona Sharoni (1995, 1999), Ann Tickner (1992, 2005), Nira Yuval-Davis (1997, 1999), my intention is to examine whether and how women’s political activism, both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, has been understood and developed as a possible emergent paradigm towards the end of the conflict. In considering this aspect, I have been primarily concerned with the difficulties in approaching the mainstream feminist theories, according to which women are considered as natural peacemakers. In order to argue about these essentialist accounts, I will take academic references along with significant findings from my fieldwork to provide a more critical analysis of the recent women’s political mobilisation focusing on the meaning of feasible alternatives to bring to an end the status of military occupation and conflict in Palestine/Israel.

Furthermore, throughout the field research I have become aware of the importance of conceptual frameworks exposed by other prominent feminist scholars such as Sandra Harding (1991), bell hooks (1992), and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991), who have dealt with issues of internal differences and power politics inside women’s movements. I will also include the very broad debate regarding viable political alternatives led by women activists and described through the so-called ‘politics of difference’²⁵ that has to be contextualised to each specific historical, political, and social situation. By recognising the necessity of going beyond the

²⁵ Such a concept will be illustrated in the next chapter, with reference to the linkage between women’s political activism and ethno-national narrative identities within conflict contexts.

misrepresentation of homogeneity within women's experiences, I will seek to comprehend and underline the diverse possibilities of women's political engagement, with specific attention to the impact of their power dynamics and boundaries.

In contemporary feminist approaches, and moving more specifically towards the field of Middle Eastern women's studies, a number of researchers have produced different definitions based on the relationship between identity and subjectivity. For instance, I have considered one of these definition statements that has been put forward by the sociologist Frances S. Hasso, who has observed:

“I use the term ‘identity’ to signify a person’s understanding of who s/he is and how s/he belongs, whereas ‘subjectivity’ signifies self-hood as constituted through language, power relations, and embodied experiences. [...] Too often, both subjectivity and identity are understood in reified, reductive, ahistorical, and essentializing ways in relation to Middle East and North Africa people and movements” (Hasso, 2005: 659-660).

I have taken these views into consideration in seeking to uncover indications that such notions might need to be rethought in a critical way. In fact, it would be necessary to avoid homogenising/essentialising categories such as feminism, conflict resolution, ethno-national identity, since different visions have to be expanded into a wider discourse. In relation to such a fundamental assumption, the scholar Ella Shohat has argued that:

“any serious analysis has to begin from the premise that genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations, and even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities, but, rather, as part of a set of permeable, interwoven relationships” (Shohat, 2001: 1296).

In addition, this approach means that women's political activism has often depended on each individual experience within common spaces and shared backgrounds. Notably, regarding one of the most crucial feminist assumptions of sisterhood, the leading feminist thinker and activist bell hooks has emphasised that cross-cultural political solidarity has the purpose of renovating joint beliefs and struggles starting with women's and feminist movements (hooks in McClintock, Mufti, and Shohat, 1997: 396-411). Taking account of this, my contribution sets out to question these controversial issues interpreted by the feminist and peace literature (confirming in some cases, whilst deconstructing in others), by giving voice directly to

the Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women I interviewed. In this way, I would position myself, as a researcher at the earliest stage of my academic career, along the pattern constructed by feminist scholars and activists that I have already quoted in this chapter, and I will take this positioning into account throughout the entire dissertation.

2.2. Method: Time, Space, and Target

By linking theory with practice to narrate Palestinian and Israeli women's political standpoints as well as initiatives, I will mainly aim at focussing my study on their own experiences, definitions and reflections. As an interdisciplinary researcher, and taking account of my academic background in international relations, women's and peace studies, I need to place my own social and political location within the main topics of the study, explaining which relationships I have constructed towards the research subjects and why I have decided to conduct such a fieldwork. In particular, I have also encountered one of the most contentious difficulties in using a feminist research approach, that is the way in which I have looked at women's grassroots realities from an outsider's point of view. Especially since feminist and women's studies have highlighted the need to valorise each woman's experience, it has been important to take into account the different ways through which women activists have articulated and explained their own participation and actions.

Starting with this preliminary theoretical basis, since 2005 a number of research activities both in the field and at the theoretical level have allowed me to enter this subject area and to gradually improve my knowledge of it. During this formative period, I have begun to interiorise the most significant standpoints that have founded feminist consciousness in relation to the methodology itself and the reality of women's political activism, both in the occupied Palestinian territories and inside Israel. During my earliest visits to Palestine/Israel in 2005 and 2006, I was able to participate in two events that provided me with important experience and offered me a chance to start exploring and being aware of contradictory and adverse realities. The first one was the *XIII International Conference of Women in Black* that took place in East Jerusalem in August 2005, as example of women's feminist activism within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and branch of the international women's peace movement. The second one, concerning the European Union project named *EPIC (European, Palestinian, and*

Israeli Cities for Health and Social Partnership) that was sponsored by the World Health Organization, was focused on domestic violence within Israeli society (Haifa) and the Palestinian population under military occupation (Gaza City). Such experiences moved me towards a deeper understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian reality, creating the founding pillars of my subsequent researches within and about Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's politics.

From that time, at least once per year, I had the opportunity to carry out fieldwork and to choose meaningfully the time, space and target of this work. I was also able to develop contacts with scholars and activists from the different communities that I decided to focus on, and to further improve my knowledge of the complex situation on the ground. However, I can borrow the following words used by the scholar Ted Swedenburg to describe my position throughout the entire period of field research:

“we ‘good foreigners’ practiced constant rituals of self-purification, designed to guarantee that we - unlike the settlers, tourists, and diplomats - were part of the Palestinian community. [...] My point is not that these actions were incorrect, but that inasmuch as they demonstrated our radical difference from ‘other’ Westerners, they allowed us to disavow our real connections to the centers of power” (Swedenburg, 1989: 265).

The proper fieldwork was conducted in a period of time divided into three phases: the first of these was from September to December 2009, the second phase covered August and September 2010, and the last one took place in June 2011. The main locations for my fieldwork were the occupied Palestinian territories (excluding the Gaza Strip), and the state of Israel, with special attention being paid to the micro-realities of Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Haifa. I decided to study these areas more exhaustively for these reasons: Ramallah constitutes the political and economic centre within the Palestinian territories; Haifa can reveal the main complexities and contradictions regarding the status of mixed Palestinian-Jewish cities within the state of Israel through everyday interactions and joint experiences; and Jerusalem brings to light what it means to attempt to move towards a feasible joint scenario that could include every citizen regardless of ethno-national or religious identities.

Although a geopolitical fragmentation has continued to be delimited by checkpoints, walls and illegal settlements, women's networks (albeit a general final status of impasse) have represented a small number of individuals but are nonetheless impressive in their potential for proposing alternative forms of activism founded on

shared values and objectives. The omission of the Gaza Strip area from my research has been mostly imposed by the present political situation that has made it extremely difficult to get an Israeli permit to enter the area. Moreover, since 2006 Gaza has been starved and strangled by a long-lasting international blockade, becoming a sort of socio-political emblem for the future of the whole region. In fact, on the one hand, intra-Palestinian factionalism between *Hamas* and *al-Fatah* has intensified the internal crisis, while on the other hand, the Israeli *Operation Cast Lead*, which took place in December 2008 and January 2009, has broken up the majority of personal and institutional relationships between Palestinian and Israeli Jews (and has had additional discouraging implications towards women's activism).

My initial interest was in studying what happened inside Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's joint initiatives in the last decade, with the attempt to underline structural and conceptual peculiarities contained by such projects. Nonetheless, as can so often emerge during the fieldwork stages, I began to view the original research proposal as being not as obviously appropriate as I had initially thought. In consequence of preliminary interviews with women activists from both sides, I realised that a considerable number of them have chosen to leave this kind of joint projects alone, and have developed very strong criticism towards them. At that point, I decided that my research should be enlarged to encompass women who have either been activists in their own national women's movements or have been involved in joint initiatives. In both cases, after the demise of the Oslo Accords, a small number of these women have continued political activities within their original socio-political organisations, whilst others have decided either to abandon effective political engagement or to renew their political participation, but this time working within different types of movements.

To take account of this change of scope, I had to revise all my research questions, and to reselect women to be contacted for open-ended semi-structured interviews²⁶, with reference to their individual behaviour and to their active political life²⁷. Especially at the beginning of my fieldwork I contacted women who have been mostly involved in the intellectual debate and, at the same time, in the internal scenario of women's peace and feminist movements. I chose the vast majority of them with regard to their recognised positions either in academia or in their own organisations. In

²⁶ I have mainly tried to create a climate of confidence so as to enable a dialogue between us, rather than to conduct a rigidly structured interview.

²⁷ An example of these semi-structured interviews is reported in the Appendix.

most cases, interviews were addressed to the older generation of secular women activists (though there were a few exceptions with younger representatives), and this has brought implications for the findings of my research, as I will demonstrate in the next chapters (particularly regarding women's role in long-lasting involvements within Palestinian-Israeli joint initiatives).

The interviews were conducted in the English language, and lasted from one to two hours. In general, duration depended partly on the interviewee's attitude, for example, some were initially slightly reluctant to be included in the selected range; however, the majority of interviewees were enthusiastic about discussing their personal experiences. In some situations, I have recognised the limitation of only being able to communicate with my interviewees in English, since perhaps I have been able to access only the most educated as well as the elite of women activists (especially when dealing with Palestinian women from the West Bank). All conversations were tape-recorded, in each case the recording was begun after asking the woman for her approval²⁸. When asked for agreement to write in full their names for future publication, no one has asked for anonymity; rather, every informant has had the opportunity to review her own interview, by reviewing my emailed text and giving me her feedback, criticism and comments as well as adding or removing parts of it.

The group of thirty-six women interviewed are composed of fifteen Palestinians from the West Bank (mainly Ramallah area) and East Jerusalem, and twenty-one Israelis, including Jews (both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi) mostly from Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Palestinian citizens of Israel from Haifa and Nazareth. Before the interviews, I already knew many of them, some just by name and some from previous meetings I had attended, such as the 2005 *International Conference of Women in Black* and other similar initiatives. My initial approach was to contact each of them directly, asking for rather informal appointments. Before going deeply into the topic, I firstly introduced myself, starting with my research-project objectives, and, once I felt them more confident and cooperative, I began to create a dialogic relationship.

I usually preferred not to structure the interviews excessively, and instead entered into discussion with the subjects, sharing and learning from their own points of view. In particular, during every interview and in the process of interpretation of my findings, I tried to evidence the different ways of self-representation employed by

²⁸ The full content of all the interviews will be not completely reproduced, and instead I am going to consider only the most significant extracts along with a brief profile of each interviewee.

women in the course of their internal political debate as well as in their grassroots activism. Beginning by asking when and why they decided to join the political life in their country, as well as whether they could tell the most significant reflections on their own experiences, I invited them to think about the interconnected key issues of my study, that are those of women's and feminist political activism, the increasing of ethno-national narrative identities both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, and the controversial debate on feasible conflict resolution perspectives.

Concerning the physical setting of our meetings, the main three locations used were either their offices, public spaces (mostly coffee bars), or private houses. The women interviewees always decided on the meeting place to be used. In the office environments, I observed different attitudes during interviews that assumed a more official tone with respect to the other interviews which were set up in more informal settings, where more comfortable conversations took place. In fact, during the most formal ones the interviewees presented viewpoints of their organisations rather than their own personal experiences and impressions, while, on the contrary, women who opted for meetings in less formal settings tended to reveal their individual histories, and perspectives on their own political involvement. In this sense, the choice of the location played a central role in building up both formal and informal connections, whilst remaining aware of the distinction between public and private spheres, and, above all, of the variance in position and agency within every women's organisation.

2.3. Palestinian and Israeli Jewish Women's Backgrounds: First Steps

The overall orientation of the following research will be based on the divergent meanings of national identity that have been constructed within women's movements and their relationships with the political background of each community in the occupied Palestinian territories, and in Israel. The concept of narrative identity requires multiple redefinitions, with the inclusion of their resultant boundaries as well as interconnections. In addition, several women's experiences can be studied through the notion of the multidimensionality that has engendered both their individual and collective frames. As a continuum of construction and reconstruction of narrative identities, every woman has used the process of self-representation to become involved in her organisation within each own community and/or in Palestinian-Israeli joint

initiatives. In line with this, I have applied a qualitative and interpretative approach using a feminist methodology focussed on giving direct expression to the voice of women I interviewed.

In the next chapters, I will discuss some problematic subjects that have challenged Palestinian and Israeli women activists, starting with such societal responses to women's issues that have been at the core of feminist discourse in the last decades. Specifically, I will concentrate my attention on women who have experienced political transformations as consequences of the general disillusionment in achieving a fair process of recognition and reconciliation between Palestinians and Israeli Jews after the Oslo Accords²⁹. Concerning such women's initiatives, one of the main substantial difficulties to be overcome has been identified as the increasing inequalities within each community as well as between the dominant and the weaker sides of the *status quo* of military occupation.

In fact, even though unbalanced fractures have mostly characterised Palestinian and Israeli Jewish interactions, other cleavages have taken place within the Israeli women's movement itself, a movement that has been often divided by conflicting and hierarchical schemes. As a result, I will also explore the heterogeneous reality within Israeli women's organisations, which may be divided into three main ethno-national narrative identities (through which they are used to define themselves): Ashkenazi (European and North American Jews), Mizrahi (Oriental Jews from Arab countries), and Palestinian (Palestinian citizens of Israel)³⁰. Such a partition stresses another fundamental debate within the Israeli feminist framework, which is the strong critique directed towards the Ashkenazi middle class mainstream. In this way, ethno-national along with class hierarchies have structured deep power relationships that have been able to create a situation of privileges also within women's activism.

In attempting to propose a useful correlation between my fieldwork and feminist theoretical interpretations, I will critically examine the empirical application of conventional frameworks used by feminist scholars regarding women's role in

²⁹ With the failure of the Oslo Accords and the resultant demise of the historical proposal founded on 'two states for two peoples', the majority of joint projects between Palestinians and Israeli Jews have come to an end. In the core of the thesis I will analyse the specific context of women's joint initiatives, in particular the most well-known coalition of the *Jerusalem Link*.

³⁰ I have decided to focus on these three largest communities, even though these categories are very flexible and I am aware of other narrative identities existing in Israeli society such as Russians, Ethiopians, new immigrants, and so forth. A more comprehensive reference to the Israeli internal heterogeneity will be taken into account relating to women's activism and their controversial interrelations inside Israel.

deconstructing ethno-national identities, and specifically in the context of military occupation. Have such perspectives been relevant within women's movements in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel? Have Palestinian-Israeli women's joint initiatives suggested alternative political pathways in order to end the military occupation and the ongoing conflict?

The course of interpreting and explaining the fieldwork data has been a continuous development of what has been named as reflexivity. This process defines the conditions in which the researcher has to recognise and comprehend his/her own background, positionality and beliefs related to his/her subject matter (Harding, 1991). It has required much effort to research within feminist paradigms that reject traditional notions of positivism and objectivity, while they are directed to shape critical views of reality based on the notion of difference. Therefore, a constant self-reflection throughout all the research has been necessary in order to problematise the way of assuming insider/outsider positions. Since I have taken the opportunity to explore and understand the various dimensions of the conflict more deeply and from different points of view, starting first of all with women's and feminist political perspectives, I hope that my contribution might have the potential to add further debate on the position of women's activism inside the Palestinian-Israeli background, as well as on the use of feminist methodology dealing with alternative conflict resolution proposals. In considering both my fieldwork experience and the theoretical challenges of such a discourse, this dissertation will attempt to rethink the current fragmented narrative identities, and their opposite struggles, in relation to women's activism within a dehumanised stalemate in the land of Palestine/Israel.

CHAPTER TWO

ETHNO-NATIONAL NARRATIVES AND WOMEN'S ACTIVISM: A CONTROVERSIAL LIAISON

1. Critical Theories on Ethno-National Identities

The complex connection among geographical places, identities, and historical narratives, points out processes of self-construction of emergent attitudes within competing ethno-nationalisms. In assuming such a premise, the ongoing debate about ethno-national issues may be founded on the following four critical frameworks: the first one divides the world into 'us' and 'them', underlining the exclusivity from other points of view and categorising people as 'friends' or 'enemies'; the second involves hegemonic power and domination that create hierarchies between opposite sides; the third turns national values into a language of morality; the last framework stresses the importance of creating institutions able to internalise the national identity into each society (Özkirimli, 2005: 32-33). In the following paragraphs I will deal with the main concepts highlighted by the feminist literature, focussing in particular on the feminist peace scholarship along with its critiques that have interrelated the issue of ethno-nationalism with women's activism, in particular with regard to their relations towards ethno-national narrative identities.

1.1. Feminist and Peace Narratives towards (De)constructing Ethno-Nationalisms

Rethinking ethno-national identities through critical lenses has meant, above all, reconsidering the existence of those different identities that may entail the concept of the 'Other', along with experiences established on the basis of class, religion, ethnicity, and gender. From this perspective, each narrative is composed of heterogeneous but interdependent identities that should be taken into account when building up challenging interactions with the 'Other'³¹. As a result of the problem introduced by the

³¹ Such a concept has been often examined by different frameworks in relation to the construction of identity within women's movements: one of the main challenges has concerned oppressed consciousness

concept of ‘Other’, a major threat to each party can be strengthened by the general denial of opposite identities that are often embedded in exclusivist patterns. According to the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who stated that “identity is partly the relationship between you and the Other” (Hall, 1989: 16), ethno-national identities are included in a system of differences that have to be contextualised towards other struggling identities.

Although several mainstream studies concerning nations and nationalisms have completely ignored women’s positions and their connections with ethno-national identities, consideration of such issues is crucial to the understanding of conflicting narratives. For this reason, the following section of the study will look at some of the main feminist and peace theoretical standpoints that have taken account of the relationship between women and the male-dominated construction of ethno-national identities. In particular, with regard to the subject of ‘public/private’ dichotomy, women’s exclusion from civil, political, and social spheres has been at the core of such a debate³². This has pointed towards two main correlated focuses: the first one is based on the concept of ‘citizenship’, and has aimed at developing women’s rights as citizens (first of all the right to vote), and at regulating the welfare state services towards women; the second area of focus has concerned women’s representation of ethno-nationalism, departing from gender-focused social procedures (McDowell, 1999: 170-202).

In dealing especially with the second subject matter, and in line with the political theorist Iris Marion Young and her influential concept of the ‘politics of difference’, injustice and oppression depend on five main dimensions to segregate an inferior group from the rest of the society: ‘exploitation’, in the sense of suppressing the values of the weaker party; ‘marginalization’, excluding a group from public participation; ‘powerlessness’, manifested by a lack of respect in the allocation of materials towards the vulnerable side; ‘cultural imperialism’, exercised by excluding the so-called ‘Other’ from the dominant group’s experiences; ‘violence’, the inflicting of damage without reason in order to humiliate the subordinate group (Young, 1990). Taking this view into consideration, the variety of differences either between social classes or between men

of minority groups, as stressed by Black feminist thought since early 1980s. Regarding African American feminism, also referred to as black American feminism, see the extensive bibliography starting with works by Patricia Bell Scott, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks.

³² Among the foremost feminist theorists, such as Cynthia Enloe, Carol Pateman, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Rebecca Grant, the idea of an absolute division between public and private spheres has been challenged, since both social dimensions cannot be understood in the absence of the other, within a sort of mutual dependence.

and women should be understood as the main bases for moving towards equality and redistribution. In such a discourse, another feminist theorist, Nancy Fraser, has supported the necessity of bringing together different structural aspects of the political struggle in order to expand the concept of social justice. Indeed, dealing with identity politics, she has explained that it is necessary to refute

“the view that we must make an either/or choice between them. [...] The most philosophically satisfying approach is to develop a more general overarching conception of justice that can encompass both distribution and recognition” (Fraser, 1997: 127).

At this point, the research will proceed straight to the core of the question of whether opposite identities and roles between men and women are socially constructed on ethno-national bases or, on the contrary, whether men and women are not separated at all by incompatible narratives. Going in depth into the reality of military occupation, the system of inequality, dispossession and violence can be deconstructed and argued through a feminist approach, and in particular by making use of the most significant bodies of peace feminist literature (together with its main critical accounts). The following analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian context relating to this issue will demonstrate that, on the one hand, more and more women have been taking part in military and nationalist planning, while, on the other hand women’s participation in peace movements has increased during the last decades, especially across ethno-national and social class divisions.

1.2. Women, Nationalism, and Conflict: Some Key Issues

After being rather marginalised by the mainstream literature, since the early 1990s, along with the increase in prominence of ethnic and nationalist conflicts, feminist theories have started to explore ethno-national identities in relation to women’s positions in conflict and post-conflict realities. In accordance with the idea that ethno-nationalism has embodied images of masculinity or femininity through specific symbols (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989; Cockburn, 1998; Enloe, 2000; McClintock, 1996; West, 1997), the interpretation of nationalist discourses has to be articulated within connective gendered relationships. Assuming that ethno-national identities reflect on

women's roles, the political scientist Cynthia Enloe has observed that nationalist men have often considered women as:

“1) the community's - or the nation's - most valuable *possessions*; 2) the principal *vehicles* for transmitting the whole nation's values from one generation to the next; 3) the *bearers* of the community's future generations - crudely, nationalist wombs; 4) the members of the community most *vulnerable* to defilement and exploitation by oppressive alien rulers; and 5) most susceptible to *assimilation* and cooption by insidious outsiders” (Enloe, 1990: 54).

Beginning from symbolic beliefs and according to long-established rules, women have taken on responsibility for and duty of protection towards their families, interpreting the role of national bearers of their traditional culture³³. In a parallel way, as maintained by conventional schemes in which women have been naturally subordinated to men inside the domestic sphere:

“women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition [...], embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity [...], embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary, principle of discontinuity” (McClintock, 1996: 263).

Moreover, concerning the 'private/public' dichotomy, the feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis has also affirmed that such a strict boundary may imply a “political act in itself” (1997: 80), evaluating the level of unbalanced powers held by male-dominated systems.

A further question to be considered within the ethno-national discourse is the matter of 'reproduction' (and particularly the birth rate issue) that has allowed a specific emphasis on women's responsibility with regard to ethno-nationalist policies. In the introduction of their pioneering research *Woman-Nation-State*, Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias proposed a detailed study of the formation of ethno-nationalisms, to be carried out by outlining the ways in which women have adopted different active roles

³³ The image of 'woman', and in particular the representation of her body, has become a predominant emblem committed to describe conceptual frameworks of purity and honour in ethno-nationalist political constructions. The metaphor of women's body used in order to assault the enemy's national sovereignty has been exploited in many conflict situations: rape as tool of war has been considered both rape of women and rape of the nation in the history as well as in the most tragic contemporary conflicts such as in the Balkans and Rwanda.

during ethno-national conflicts and nation-building processes. They have delineated five possible aspects of the status of women:

“as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; as signifiers of ethnic/national differences; as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989: 7).

In taking into consideration different ways of approaching towards ethno-national narrative identities, it may be crucial to understand whether and in which terms they have become explicit in daily life and within socio-political struggles. In line with such an approach, a vast majority of feminist scholars have suggested a more visible inclination sustained by women to achieving equality and reconciliation in ethno-national conflict contexts. In fact, the feminist literature has represented women as political actors that belong to ethno-national affiliations, in addition to political, class and educational backgrounds. Women have seemed to be more critical of nationalist ruling schemes³⁴, and thus more able to create connections with the often unknown ‘Other’, though this has continued to be a controversial topic, as I will show in the outcomes of my fieldwork.

1.3. Feminist Peace Literature and Its Critiques

Along the same pathway, the previous essentialist picture of women as natural peacemakers has often been assumed and, at the same time, criticised. In conflict and post-conflict environments, on the one hand, feminist academics along with political activists have argued that women have an alternative way of experiencing feasible resolutions of the conflict and acting within such alternative backgrounds; on the other hand, this standpoint has been considered inadequate when looking at the divisions and differences existing between women themselves in relation to their several narrative identities and historical contexts. This debate has put forward the need for feminist

³⁴ On the other hand, when such ideas have started to be addressed to non-Western societies they have been mostly judged as colonial narratives, especially concerning women’s status and violations of their rights both at home and overseas (Chatty and Rabo, 1997: 15-16).

scholarship to begin by critically exploring a variety of social and political issues connected with the struggling dimension of power relations.

Using Chandra Mohanty's definition of 'cartographies of struggle' (1991), I want to call attention to the different feminist accounts that have varied across time and places through which activists have given several significances of each own experience. According to the feminist literature that has attempted to challenge some of these essentialist points of view, in my study I have considered the urge for reflecting on the multiplicity of voices and perspectives existing not only between women and men, but also within each women's group and movement. As the feminist scholar Cynthia Cockburn has stated when dealing with women activists in Northern Ireland, Palestine/Israel and Bosnia-Herzegovina:

“they have been caught up in coercive and narrowing identity processes. [...] In working together now the question was: how could they construct a fully social space between and among them all? [...] Within this problematic emerge many more concrete questions challenging each individual woman but affecting the functioning of the collective as a whole. How may I understand and deal with the gap between my own sense of myself and the particular forms of ethnic, national, religious, gender and political identity with which others associate me? What sense can I make of the dramatic contradictions and shifts I feel in my sense of myself (and that of other women) due to the violent changes in our contexts?” (Cockburn, 1998:15).

In order to pursue this research objective, I have made use of the most critical feminist approaches that have emphasised the necessity of constructing theory within the everyday practices and lives of ordinary people³⁵. Especially in times of conflict, understanding women's experiences under multiple oppressive power relations has become a crucial starting point towards problematising the mainstream feminist perspectives. In this way, I have also taken account of the so-called 'gendering' of the international relations field that has given new insights on different implications of conflicts for women's and men's lives as well as on the existing systems based on

³⁵ Throughout the thesis I have adopted critical feminist approaches that have founded their analyses on differences and inequalities within women's and feminist movements. As I have already quoted in the previous paragraphs, I have specifically taken account of the complex and challenging works by the feminist scholars Sandra Harding and Chandra Mohanty, who have argued about the necessity of starting from women's daily lives and struggles. In detail, see chapter three, four and five concerning diverse perspectives as well as internal divisions inside women's activism, especially in the Israeli one and also in Palestinian-Israeli women's joint initiatives.

gendered power hierarchies (see Enloe, 1990; Peterson, 1992; Tickner, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

The central tension between ethno-national narratives and feminist approaches has been addressed by a growing body of literature on gender issues in conflict and post-conflict situations. On the one side, this complex relationship both in academia and within political struggles in the field has included a special focus on women's activism in challenging gendered violence based on different forms of nationalism. However, on the other side, it has been also faced the necessity of paying attention to the specific historical and political contexts in which women are embedded. In this sense, above all the case of the Palestinian liberation struggle and the involvement of women within it will be examined in the next chapter (on this specific issue I will attempt to go along the pathway already traced by scholars such as Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin, 2002; Simona Sharoni, 1993, 1995; Sophie Richter-Devroe 2009).

Nevertheless, due to the fact that in many cases (starting with Palestinian-Israeli women's joint initiatives, as I will examine in chapter five) women activists' contributions have not yet become critical interventions towards the male-dominated *status quo* of unequal power relations, it has become crucial to raise further questions concerning the real implications of such a women's political involvement. In doing this throughout my field research, my work has aimed at making the diverse roles and practices of women's political activism visible within the specific reality of military occupation and the asymmetry between the two sides of the conflict.

Starting with analysing such perspectives has allowed me to understand how the majority of women I interviewed have struggled not only to achieve the end of the conflict, but also to achieve fair equality and redistribution among and within their own societies. As previously introduced, and as will be discussed in depth throughout the analysis of Palestinian and Israeli women's plural internal perspectives and power relations, the main difficulty mainstream feminist theorists have encountered regarding fragmented identities and politics of difference has needed to be questioned. In fact, such a reflection is strictly related to the other foremost current debate dealing with women's positions in conflict resolution policies and peace-building strategies, which I will partially address in chapter five by a critical view on women's joint initiatives. Among the most recent significant contributions on calling for these academic as well as grassroots feminist accounts, the scholars Nadjé Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt have underlined that:

“rather than victimizing ourselves, we need to look for creative ways of engaging with the situation. Strengthening our networks with like-minded feminist scholars is a good first step. As our scholarship and our networks grow, it becomes increasingly difficult for ‘mainstream’ scholars to ignore us” (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009: 268).

1.4. ‘Feminist Nationalism’: Meaning and Perspectives

Continuing with the analysis of the interrelationship between ethno-national and feminist narratives, this sub-paragraph will explore the theoretical studies that have intersected women’s feminist responses towards ethno-national collective identities, with the aim of leading to the analysis of my fieldwork. The expression of ‘feminist nationalism’ has been used by the scholar Lois A. West in editing a collective volume (1997) in which she has shown that “women are (re)constructing the meaning of both nationalism and feminism from a women-centred viewpoint. [...] There is a cross-cultural, or global, phenomenon as feminist nationalism” (xiii-xxix). In this way, she defines feminist nationalist movements as “simultaneously seeking rights for women and rights for nationalists within a variety of social, economic, and political contexts” (xxx). Whether it may be considered as an intellectual taunt, it has represented one of the most challenging arguments within the Western feminist mainstream.

In deconstructing and, consequently, reconstructing women’s positions along with their own national groups and their interconnected narratives, the so-called ‘feminist standpoint theory’ has stressed the importance that women become self-definers concerning what they identify with feminism and nationalism (Sprague and Zimmerman in England, 1993: 255-280). Such a practice of reconceptualising women’s relations to ethno-national issues has established social as well as political changes through which women have achieved active roles, rather than being passive participants in the backdrop. In dealing with such a perspective, a feminist nationalist approach has been proposed in order to be different from traditional feminisms and to understand gendered interactions founded on ethno-nationalist specific contexts.

As a matter of fact, in spite of an increasing feminist discourse within male-dominated societies and ethno-national conflict areas, critical analyses could not completely reject the great variety of ethno-national identity constructions that have

continued to be at the core of the contemporary world (West, 1997: xi-xv). At the same time (and not always in contrast to ethno-nationalist frameworks), the meaning of feminism may be reconstructed as a political response to gendered ethno-national conflicts. In fact, even though in the last decades feminist mainstream has strongly demanded women's participation and empowerment, it has also focused on denouncing dominant gender unbalanced power in the field of nationalist issues that have been manipulated by male aspirations and privileges.

In providing for such a purpose, this feminist approach towards challenging ethno-nationalisms has acquired an alternative political strategy in order to question the current spread of male-based theories; to highlight women's cultural and political activism within nation-building experiences; to connect national institutions with other social structures through a critical way; to show up additional forms of exclusion, such as racial, ethnic, and class power, and also as existing inside the feminist movements (McClintock, 1996: 261). Within different feminist consciousnesses, the main challenge for integrating theory and action has been related to the analysis of distinct ethno-national patterns where women have been incorporated. In these terms, alongside the consideration of ethno-nationalist claims, contradictions, and challenges, such a feminist approach has the objective of proposing dialectic between women's studies and ethno-national subjects. In addition, in the pathway of what has been defined as feminist nationalism, the way in which each individual's identity includes ethnic, cultural, kin, class, religious and political narratives has been considered.

2. Feminism(s) in the Middle East Scenario

In the following paragraph I will briefly cover a few of specific issues that have emerged from the Middle Eastern context, and in particular those highlighted by feminist scholars who have developed strong critiques towards both ethno-nationalist issues founded on male-dominated hierarchies and the prospects for mainstream conflict resolution³⁶. In relation to the worldwide scenario, and also to the Middle East, the linkage between ethno-nationalism and feminist theory/activism has increased its

³⁶ Such theoretical inputs are relevant in order to provide a complete picture of the internal Middle Eastern debate concerning women's movements, growing feminism(s), and criticism towards ethno-national narrative identities. In spite of this, they will be only analysed in general terms due to the fact that the research aims at focusing on the specificity of the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel.

visibility at the micro-level of everyday life as well as within academia. From the time when, during the XX century, Middle Eastern political leaderships started to take account of women's role within the nationalist narrative, contradictory debates have taken place inside national liberation movements as well as within state-building processes (Joseph, 2000: 4-11).

Within deep-rooted ethno-national backgrounds, in the Middle East as elsewhere, women "have become potent symbols of identity and visions of society and the nation" and "actively participate in these debates and social struggles, with feminism, defined in sometimes quite different ways" (Abu-Lughod, 1998: 3). Although women's activism has emerged in a significant number of ethno-nationalist political struggles (with the Palestinian national liberation movement being one of the most well-known examples), they have been largely prevented from achieving leading roles in post-revolutionary and post-colonial contexts.

2.1. Beyond Stereotypes: Feminism(s), Ethno-National Narratives and Conflict

In the light of the heterogeneous viewpoints expressed by a number of different women's movements in the region, the scholar Deniz Kandiyoti has put forward one of the most widely accepted descriptions of women's political activism in the Middle East. By taking account of growing Middle Eastern feminism(s), she has underlined three main key phases of development: the first one was enabled by giving voice to the universal subordination of women in association with the spreading of social reforms and modernization processes on a national scale during the post-colonial era; the second development saw the growth to maturity of specific feminist orientations, which were considered alongside liberal, Marxist/socialist, psychoanalytic and post-structuralist models that encouraged demanding questions about family and the role of women in society; the third stage, that includes the current status of development, has seen the shifting of the category which is subject to analysis from women to gender studies, embodying the whole of society and its social processes as gendered constructions, and has been seen to have a relationship with various currents of Western feminism (Kandiyoti, 1996: 2-15).

In the majority of Middle Eastern societies the interpretation of feminism(s) has been a problematic challenge, since it may include orientalist and neo-colonial attitudes,

reproducing the Western women's model. In addition, as will become evident in the next chapters by analysing the fieldwork outcomes, univocal meanings of feminism have been refused in terms of anti-national delegitimisation, rather than narrative identity used by women's self-representation. As a consequent analytical step, another major challenge that has questioned feminist theories in the Middle East was already identified by Edward W. Said in his masterpiece *Orientalism*. This has not only meant a cultural construction, but also a gendered perspective through which "latent Orientalism also encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world" where Oriental women are "usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (Said, 1978: 207). In this way, the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has maintained that Said offered a sort of model to Middle Eastern feminists by criticising the Western domination (Abu-Lughod, 2001: 112). In fact, Western feminist scholars have tended to objectify non-Western women in terms of 'Others', by practices of ethnocentrism and hegemonic superiority, working under the assumption that feminism represents a Western-originated phenomenon.

On the contrary, Middle Eastern women have attempted to configure an alternative ideal of feminism(s) based on the concept of difference³⁷, in order to put forward their own historical, cultural, political and religious narratives, along with their nationalist discourse. As a response to the Western feminist mainstream, what has been defined as 'subordinate nationalism' has become fundamental in considering the social balance between (neo)-colonial rules and internal patriarchal systems (Jacoby, 1999). Nonetheless, a real equilibrium between principles of women's liberation and goals of national liberation movements has not always been guaranteed once national independences have been reached. Such a consequence has created a large amount of disillusionment among women's movements towards national liberation struggles across the post-colonial countries of the Middle East.

This issue has represented the first key point of the whole research, in the way of defining how both ethno-national aims have been strictly related to the mobilization of women's narrative identities and their socio-political roles, as directed respectively towards the discourse founded on national security (for the Israeli Jewish women

³⁷ As stressed by post-modern theories, the notion of 'politics of difference' is not enclosed within strict social systems, rather it is perceived as a complexity of plurality and fragmentation among different subjectivities. It will be explained in detail in the next chapters.

activists) and towards national liberation (for the Palestinian ones)³⁸. Though from different perspectives, and associated with an increasing asymmetry of power and privileges between the ‘occupier’ and the ‘occupied’, the requirement of gender-sensitive lenses to explore the implications of the conflict on women’s everyday struggles and its lasting resolution has been suggested by several feminist scholars. Among them, Simona Sharoni has stressed:

“the role of gender in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict extends beyond what it means to be a man or a woman, gender plays an important role, shaping individual and collective identities as well as dominant interpretations of the conflict and prospects for its resolution” (Sharoni, 1995: 118).

In this framework, the other crucial topic that I have considered throughout my study, and one that I will specifically focus on in Part II of the thesis, is related to different ways through which women political activists have addressed and, in some cases, questioned the significance of recognition and reconciliation in the context of a possible future conflict resolution in Palestine/Israel. As mentioned in the previous section concerning feminist peace scholarship, I have sought to consider the principle political dilemmas that have been raised by women’s and feminist proposals, giving particular attention to the Palestinian-Israeli women’s joint initiatives which have taken place within an environment of military occupation.

Although I have not aimed to go into the body of literature dealing with alternative prospects for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in depth, I am aware that particular attention has started to be paid towards interconnections and divergences among women’s feminist initiatives directed to uncover and transform unequal structures of power. This has represented the main reason why I have decided to question in a parallel way both the above-mentioned essentialist feminist standpoints and the conventional understandings of reconciliation (employed as the basic pillars of conflict resolution theories), which have often reproduced asymmetric relations.

Another persistent feminist dilemma has been represented by the patriarchal system operating within the majority of Middle Eastern societies that are founded around the family core. It reflects how the domestic arena is strictly attached to every aspect of daily life such as economic and political issues, social relationships, in

³⁸ In chapters three and four I will attempt to underline these two contrasting narratives within the women’s movements both in the West Bank and in Israel.

contiguity between private (kinship) and public (mainly governmental) spheres. Such a discourse has promoted on the one hand what has been described in terms of ‘connectivity’, which particularly involves family solidarity, while on the other hand, the intersection between familial relationality and patriarchy has structured deeper systems of domination and subordination³⁹ (Rubenberg, 2001: 32-41). Among further analyses, Deniz Kandiyoti has defined the expression of ‘patriarchal bargain’ in the sense that it affects women’s identity and creates new forms of struggle based on gendered relationships within socio-economic transformations (Kandiyoti, 1988)⁴⁰.

As part of a continuum, consideration should also be given to the military experiences of women in conflict and post-conflict backgrounds. Writing about this issue and its relation to the imperatives of national security, which have often been generated in male-dominated settings, the feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe has maintained that:

“militarization puts a premium on communal unity in the name of national survival, a priority which can silence women critical of patriarchal practices and attitudes; in so doing, nationalist militarization can privilege men” (Enloe, 1990: 58).

By moving in depth into the Palestinian as well as Israeli Jewish women’s political activism throughout the following chapters, the analysis will emphasise the ongoing increase of militarisation among the everyday realities of life. In the Israeli case in particular, women’s voices have been increasingly excluded from the public scenario with the aim of intensifying the masculinised expressions of the society. By using a persistent rhetoric established on national security, militarised and patriarchal nationalist constructions, paradigms of masculinity and femininity have strengthened their functions.

³⁹ One of the main scholars that have approached this issue has been the anthropologist Suad Joseph, throughout her researches about Arab families in Lebanon (1993, 1994). She has stated that ‘relationality’ is an ongoing process by which everyone is socially oriented under different political and economic regimes. Starting with this assumption she has also developed further understanding of the internal dynamics of kinship.

⁴⁰ An additional concept connected with post-colonial state building in the Middle East has been delineated by the academic Hisham Sharabi as ‘neo-patriarchy’ (1988), in order to describe the linkage between economic/political macro and micro structures existing within the community and the family.

2.2. Religion as a Further Major Feature

Religion is considered to be another central paradigm that must be taken into account, since religious identity has been institutionalised in terms of political identity within numerous Middle Eastern countries (Joseph, 2000: 11-15). In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson has maintained that nationalism has been recognised as encapsulated into family relationships and religion, instead as a mere ideology. The tightened link between nationalism and religion has produced the dominant social dynamics, and it is not correct to consider religion as being in opposition to contemporary nation-state building⁴¹. In focusing on such a theoretical framework, the increasing significance of religion in the political discourse of the Middle East is beyond question.

In the field, a radical shift has taken place, reformulating the national narratives in connection with the religious ones, through which religious nationalists have absorbed the political majority of secular nationalists. Also in Palestine/Israel, the religious paradigm has been proposed as an alternative reaction to the persisting deadlock as well as to the general scepticism regarding the mainstream political parties. In particular, the current failure to achieve a real ‘peace process’ has promoted religious parties, including mainly *Hamas* (with its internal partition between political and military wings) and *Islamic Jihad* on the Palestinian side, and the orthodox religious bloc, from the oriental ultra-orthodox party *Shas* to the religious settlers’ movement *Gush Emunim*, as the Israeli Jewish counterpart⁴².

Reflecting on this concept and linking it to women’s roles in ethno-national conflicts, the feminist scholar Valentine Moghadam has explained that:

“if the nation is an extended family writ large, then women’s role is to carry out the tasks of nurturance and reproduction. If the nation is defined as a religious entity, then the appropriate models of womanhood are to be found in scripture.

⁴¹ From a parallel perspective, according to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, ‘religion’ may be considered as a cultural system and it may be analysed in a two-stage operation: firstly studying the system of meanings embodied within religious symbols and, after that, relating these systems to social structures and psychological processes (Geertz, 1973).

⁴² Socio-political transformations in the Palestinian-Israeli Jewish background have recently been the objects of remarkable academic works. See the main latest studies: Loren D. Lybarger, *Identity and Religion in Palestine: the Struggle between Islamism and Secularism in the Occupied Territories*, concerning the Palestinian case and its internal complex transition of political identities through violent fights between *Hamas* and *al-Fatah*. On the Israeli Jewish side, Noah J. Efron, *Real Jews: Secular VS. Ultra-Orthodox and the Struggle for Jewish Identity in Israel* and Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, regarding diverse Jewish realities inside Israel and their narratives.

Nationhood has been recast in these terms in the latter part of the twentieth century, and this has distinct implications for definition of gender, for the position of women, and for feminism as an emancipatory project” (Moghadam, 1994: 4).

In the latest decade, women’s involvement in religious movements has been increasingly examined and analysed by feminist academics, with particular attention being paid to women’s support for ethno-nationalist identity politics, and in particular within the current crisis of secular authorities and Western neo-colonialism.

Despite the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which has determined an increasing popular support towards religious movements and parties, my research focus will be mainly directed to women activists who have not defined themselves as religious people, albeit from different experiences within individual as well as collective narratives. For this reason, I have decided not to address to a large extent the role of religion in my analysis, rather examining socio-political claims and practices that have provided a strong interconnection among ethno-national narrative identities, women’s feminist initiatives, and reconciliation prospects within the asymmetric context of military occupation in the land of Palestine.

CHAPTER THREE

PALESTINIAN WOMEN AND DEEP-ROOTED NATIONAL NARRATIVE IDENTITY

1. Women's National Struggle in Palestine

In the following chapter the analysis aims at examining Palestinian women's activism in relation to the concepts of ethno-nationalism together with feminism(s) within their specific political context. Later, in chapter four, a parallel research will be conducted involving Israeli Palestinian and Jewish women. As previously stated, my main object will be to formulate answers to the first three research questions, which concern the relationship between the ethno-national and feminist narratives of Palestinian women activists under military occupation, highlighting their key points as well as their internal differences. By combining theoretical questions of what has been explored in the previous chapters and effective issues developed by the fieldwork, such a politics needs to be contextualised into women's struggles. In this sense, the mutual impact of ethno-national and women's feminist narratives has been recognised and, in many cases (albeit through different viewpoints) legitimised by Palestinian women political activists.

When approaching the study of Palestinian women's backgrounds, practices and perspectives, it is first necessary to stress the historical as well as socio-political context in which women activists have built up their politics. Palestinian women live within a stateless nation where the struggle led by a national liberation movement has taken the central place in their everyday realities, in contrast with an institutionalised nationalism and established nation-state (the Jewish state of Israel). In other words, considering the two opposite sides, national liberation (for Palestinians) and national security (for Israeli Jews) can be described as the most crucial discourses at the heart of the conflict, and the setting from which the findings of my research have been structured.

This is why such intersections among diverse narrative identities have been critical towards women's understanding and agency in their national experiences. In the Palestinian women's movements, and in the Israeli ones as well, ethno-national identities have regulated women's everyday life, reflecting opposite visions and internal

arguments, but operating in conflicting contexts determined by the diverse consequences of military occupation. Within the considerable disparities of power and privileges existing between the two parties of the conflict, women's struggles both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel have been increasingly influenced by the two separate ethno-national collective identities. Over the recent decades a significant literature has arisen, and I will use a collection of multidisciplinary researches with the aim of discussing women's beliefs and actions in relation to such structural conditions within both societies.

1.1. Historical Roots of Palestinian Women's National Activism

From the time of the Balfour Declaration⁴³, Palestinian women joined demonstrations against the British Mandate policy, taking part in armed struggles between Palestinians and Jewish settlers that gave evidence of extended women's actions within the resistance movement (Gluck in West, 1997: 104). In 1921, the earliest expression of a structured women's organisation, the *Palestine Women's Union*, founded by educated and upper-class urban women, started to be focused on the link between nationalist and gender issues⁴⁴, although they did not achieve social-political support from grassroots women. A few years later, in 1929, the first *Arab Women's Congress* took place in Jerusalem, chaired by the wife of the Arab executive committee head, Musa Kazim al-Husayni, demonstrating how the initial political participation of women was influenced and limited by the male vanguard of the Palestinian national leadership (Jad in Pappé, 1999: 250-252).

The fact that mainly upper and middle-class women held prominent positions is not surprising, and this has continued through the following decades, generating some tensions due to the partial exclusion of poorer women, especially peasants from rural areas. Despite the involvement of such a restricted range in terms of class, women increased their political impact within the national struggle during the 1936-39 Arab

⁴³ Even in the early 1910s, Palestinian urban elite women organised, funded and ran many charitable associations with the purpose of improving socio-economic situations of women from rural and deprived areas.

⁴⁴ Both the traditional *hamula* (the extended family background), which represented the core of hierarchal and patriarchal social structure in the Palestinian history, and the Zionist immigration that intensified dispossession and displacement of local Palestinians, have illustrated aims and transformations through which Palestinian women had to maintain their complete support to the national resistance movement.

Revolt against the escalation of Zionist policy. In moving towards the first stage of political emancipation, Palestinian women demonstrated their strong determination to challenge both local and foreign power institutions.

What happened after 1948, the time of *Nakba*, the Palestinian ‘Catastrophe’, and the establishment of the state of Israel, affected Palestinian women through the loss of their homes and dispossession of their lands, forcing them to become refugees and to mobilise every resource in order to supply basic needs and psychological assistance for the survival of their families. As a consequence of the expulsion of over the eighty per cent of Palestinians, women in exile matured the national cause as the plight of an entire people that should have strengthened its own political and cultural identities. Speaking about *Nakba* narratives, women were marginalised in two ways, with regard to their communities, as well as to their domestic roles within such a tragic reality. Moreover, women’s collective narratives presented alternative frameworks in comparison with the official ones, suggesting a comprehensive picture linked to the social status, rather than to the political scenario, as a result of private recollections of their own daily lives (Brand in Litvak, 2009: 169-189). In this context, even though women’s everyday experiences pursued autonomous political space, they were usually silenced by the dominant nationalist male discourse (Sayigh in Sa’di and Abu-Lughod, 2007: 209-225).

Within the argument that was raised about the relationship between modernity and tradition, women’s political participation in the national resistance continued to reflect contradictory and challenging viewpoints. Although the 1964 Palestine National Charter showed Palestinians as a unitary expression defined through male identity, a new era for women’s activism encouraged the creation of the *General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW)*⁴⁵ as a women’s branch inside the *Palestine Liberation Organization*. At the beginning, their support, particularly employed for literacy, first-aid, and nursing, was included in the campaign of *sumud* (‘steadfastness’) that marked political activism of the growing national movement. A few years later, with the Israeli military occupation of the greater part of historic Palestine in 1967 and the consequent mobilisation of the Palestinian national guerrilla movement⁴⁶, women began to think

⁴⁵ Since its establishment, it has been considered as the official Palestinian women’s representative institution not only in the occupied Palestinian territories, but also in all Arab countries, by mobilizing women socially, politically, culturally within their communities. More documents are available at <URL: <http://www.gupw.net/en/about.php>>

⁴⁶ An additional discourse should be pointed out in relation to Palestinian women in the diaspora, especially in Lebanon, where their socio-political mobilization has assumed a strong role within the everyday struggle in the refugee camps.

about the paradox that concerned their role within the national struggle and their representation inside the patriarchal society.

The political leadership of that time suggested three main images of Palestinian womanhood: as the ‘superwoman’ totally worshiped, as the ‘fertile mother’ of the nation and as the characterisation of the national honour (Abdulahdi, 1998: 654-656). Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, four women committees⁴⁷, known as ‘utors’, each one associated to the major political factions, began to explore deeply the development of grassroots women’s socialization and independence, with villages and refugee camps included in their scope of activity (Abdo in Moghadam, 1994: 159-161). These initiatives characterised principally a political process that led them to face responsibilities towards women’s issues and rights in the direction of a national unity. From that historical moment, as in many other countries around the world, women’s political participation started to use the conception of feminism, although controversial questions have been raised about contents and implications correlated to its significance⁴⁸.

1.2. Uprising National Consciousness: Intifadah as a Turning Point

It was in 1987, during the earliest days of the first *Intifadah*, that the Palestinian women’s movement reached a real potential in the national struggle, connecting women from all ages and social classes under the *United Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU)*. During the first stage of my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to meet some Palestinian women from Beit Sahour (West Bank), who have been involved in the women’s group organised by the *Alternative Information Centre*. They told me that they started to be

⁴⁷ Each of them was established on gender equality and democratic decision-making issues. They were: the *Palestinian Federation of Women’s Action Committees (FWAC)*, ideologically affiliated to the *Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine*; the *Union of Palestinian Working Women’s Committees (UPWWC)*, ideologically affiliated to the *Communist Party*; the *Union of Palestinian Women’s Committee (UPWC)*, ideologically affiliated to the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine*; and the *Association of Women’s Committees for Social Work (AWCSW)*, ideologically affiliated to *al-Fatah*. Although this division was a result of factional disputes rather than alternative political perspectives described by women’s organisations themselves, a new pattern between national and social oppression facilitated the development of feminist consciousness-raising within the Palestinian national movement. In fact, during the most significant demonstrations and strikes, the above-mentioned four groups coordinated their activities in order to develop social support to gendered awareness in women’s everyday life.

⁴⁸ In particular see the intellectual contributions provided by the feminist scholars from the *Women’s Studies Institute* at Birzeit University.

politically active against the Israeli occupation policy during the first *Intifadah*, and in particular when their sons were arrested because of their struggles against the Israeli army and put in prison by means of the so-called ‘administrative detention’. As happened to many other women, these experiences demonstrated the linkage between private sphere and political participation, through which the majority of Palestinian women began their political activism.

Several cooperative projects (many of them principally producing food) allowed women to adopt different forms of participatory and grass-rooted democracy in which they could get new roles in the public sphere, beyond patriarchal kinships, and these projects also included the boycotting of Israeli goods within their scope. Involvement in the struggle also meant the idea of economic independence by women, who assumed a central position in exploring emancipation within the national-political liberation of their people (Abdo in Moghadam, 1994: 157-161). As the anthropologist Julie Peteet described in her survey of Palestinian women’s resistance:

“a movement by and for women that could act independently in the development of its history, organizational structure, and the policy positions adopted, as well as in the allocation of its resources, but at the same time remain vitally cognizant of and analyze women’s condition in the context of the broader Palestinian condition and remain committed to and active in the larger struggle for national self-determination” (Peteet, 1991: 209-210).

The construction of a new category of ‘woman’ and its relationship with conventional societal norms introduced structural and ideological transformations, calling into question patriarchal values. In relation to the increasing intellectual and academic relevance of empowering women’s and feminist awareness, the *Women’s Studies Institute* at Birzeit University has begun to consider the need to create public spaces and debates on specific women’s agenda, establishing one of the main research groups in the occupied Palestinian territories. In particular, within the Institute, each scholar has analysed diverse perspectives relating to the *Intifadah* struggle, for example: Eileen Kuttub has advanced explications about the change of female modes in political participation; Islah Jad has focused on the family pattern to distinguish different stages of political activism; Reema Hammami has studied the structural rising of popular mobilization⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ See *News From Within*, January 1991.

With regard to the development of symbolic and practical female roles within the national identity discourse, women moved from a traditional to a non-traditional activism through which they attempted to transform conventional gendered structures of the patriarchal family system (Jacoby, 1999: 512-515). In the tragic reality of military occupation, everyday activities arranged by women became the most influential features of non-violent grassroots resistance in the occupied Palestinian territories. This is evident in what has been reported by a leading Palestinian woman activist and current director of the *Women's Affair Center (WAC)*⁵⁰, Naila Ayesh, who has maintained that:

“the Israeli occupation focused more on men; so, as Palestinian woman activist, it was easier for me to move from one place to another. For this main reason, I think that Palestinian women played a very big role in the first *Intifadah* regarding all its aspects of our national form of struggle and resistance. As women we are half of our society: our duty is to be part of the political, social, and economic debates; to participate in the change of all aspects of our society. We need to raise awareness that women have to achieve an active role in the society”⁵¹.

In spite of national women's advocacy, one of the major questions that arose at that time dealt with two opposite standpoints: either women's role in political activism could change their status, or the traditional society still prevailed. This internal controversy has been confirmed by many women interviewees who assumed central positions and considered that period as one of the main turning points of their generation, when they began to realise that their experiences were different than men's political militancy. Based on such a belief, Amal Khreishe, the general director of the *Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development (PWWSD)*⁵², has underlined that:

“women's role is inside the community to fill the gap of the absence of the national state, but when you talk about the oppression under the Israeli military occupation, you have to understand that the dynamics of dealing with this oppression as women is different than from men. [...] Furthermore, during the

⁵⁰ An independent and non-profit Palestinian NGO based in Gaza City, with the objective of empowering women, advocating women's rights and gender equality. More details are available at <URL:<http://wac.org.ps/en/>>

⁵¹ Interview with Naila Ayesh, Ramallah, October 20, 2009.

⁵² Founded in 1981 under the name *Union of Palestinian Working Women Committees*, it was officially registered by the Palestinian National Authority as a non-governmental organisation, and it became the *Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development* in 2001. As it has been written in its founding declaration, it is “a non-governmental, independent, feminist organisation, wholly integrated into civil society and an indivisible part of the democratic women's developmental movement, locally, regionally, and internationally”. More information is available at <URL:<http://www.pwwsd.org/new/index.php>>

Intifadah the West Bank and Gaza Strip were open to many solidarity groups and media agencies, it was a good opportunity for us to be visible. Also the national movement gave us more space to move and to act freely”⁵³.

Looking into these words, it is unquestionable that Palestinian women played a more crucial role in the political experience of the *Intifadah*, giving priority to the national liberation aim, since a gendered political agenda was not completely reached.

Along with the internal Palestinian transformation after the Madrid Conference in 1991 and through the opening stage of what has been defined as the Palestinian-Israeli ‘peace process’, the rise of women’s political support for the ongoing project of an independent state was seen as a further historical step forward. Women were called to perform leading functions in terms of the national political expressions of a democratic and egalitarian society, although such a proposal remained mostly on the theoretical level (Dayan-Herzbrun, 2005: 65-70). At the beginning of the 1990s, Palestinian women’s committees and human rights non-governmental organisations, primarily for an initiative of the *Women’s Affairs Technical Committee (WATC)* in cooperation with the *General Union of Palestinian Women* in Tunis, proposed the so-called ‘Declaration of Principles on Palestinian Women’s Rights’⁵⁴, a sort of women’s bill of rights based on the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence.

Although women’s political autonomy was partially restricted by the emergence of the Palestinian National Authority, for the first time this declaration of principles clearly demonstrated the connection between national and women’s rights, and their recognition within Palestinian society. It advocated “equal opportunities for women in rights and obligations” in relation to “discrimination and inequality against women”, including politics of colonialism on Palestine (the Israeli military occupation) and the patriarchal system reinforced by “customs and traditions” (GUPW 1994 in Hasso, 2005: 131-134). Moreover, in highlighting the concept of equality, Palestinian women had to struggle for their personal status and to question *Islamic Shari’a* by means of reconsidering the whole framework of legislation within a gendered equity understanding⁵⁵ (Jad, Johnson, and Giacaman in Joseph, 2000: 147-152).

⁵³ Interview with Amal Khreishe, Ramallah, December 9, 2009.

⁵⁴ Formulated in 1994, this document called for social justice, gender equality and egalitarian opportunities for women in social, civil, political, economic and cultural rights.

⁵⁵ As explained in the essay *Transit Citizens: Gender and Citizenship under the Palestinian Authority* by Islah Jad, Penny Johnson and Rita Giacaman (2000), *Islamic Shari’a* defines its specific model of family and gendered relations in terms of complementarity between male and female roles, rather than equality, with consequences on rights and obligations within familial relationships.

In considering another main research question of my study, the internal differentiation within Palestinian women's activism can be mostly related to both class differences and the increasing influential role of Islam in women's political mobilization. As I have previously mentioned, in the plurality of Palestinian women's organisations I will examine the perspectives and initiatives experienced by secular women activists: such a decision has led my study towards a controversial critique, which focussed mainly on the foremost women leaders, who have represented the middle class and intellectual elite residing in the urban centres of the West Bank, and who have been historically involved in Palestinian-Israeli women's joint projects. Owing to the lack of opportunities and the difficulty in pursuing contacts, only in a few cases I was able to interview the younger women who have been more connected with the current reality of popular resistance. Consequently, this has directed the findings of the research towards a restricted target, rooted in their particular individual and political experiences gained through participation in the *Intifadah* as secular women activists within the national liberation struggle.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the religious framework has become an important identity sphere within the whole Palestinian society. In fact, since the end of 1980s, Muslim women's organisations have emerged within the Palestinian national resistance; the interrelation among Islam, feminist narratives, and socio-political transformations has drawn alternative approaches towards the Palestinian women's political involvement. The rise of Islamic militant groups, such as *Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement)* and *Islamic Jihad*, has been supported by a substantial number of women who have legitimised Islamic norms to emancipate their womanhood within traditional values. In such a discourse, the contentious debate about interpreting Islam and its relationship with national, familial and societal spheres has structured different interpretations of women's roles, often in opposition to Western images of womanhood (Jacoby, 1999).

Adopting a critical attitude towards secular activists and Western-focused representations, Muslim women involved with these political organisations have debated which kind of balance should be legitimised between women's personal status and religious practices, looking at Islam as having potential for assisting their individual and collective struggles⁵⁶. Defined by the scholar Nahla Abdo as "a form of escapism

⁵⁶ Concerning this debate, see the previous chapter where I took briefly into consideration the religious frame to analyse ethno-national challenges within women's political activism.

from the total impasse the region has slipped into on almost all fronts” (1993: 36), the complexity of women’s struggles and its role within the rise of Muslim socio-political framework has required further analysis and understanding.

To illustrate this, the religious and social uprising has been mainly explained as reaction to despair, disillusionment, and frustration that the Palestinian people has suffered after the first *Intifadah*, and particularly following the demise of the Oslo Accords. In this perspective, women who have supported Islamic movements have argued around key issues, such as the central role of women in the family, the value of *Shari’a* as the basis of the social status law, and the moral system that has been threatened by secular approaches (Jad and Hammami, 1992). Within such a context, the emergence of Muslim women’s activism⁵⁷, and above all the *Muslim Sisters*, has demonstrated an attempt to give rise to their own agency for interpreting women’s social problems through Islamic lenses (Rubenberg, 2001: 230-238).

1.3. Women’s Role within a Future Palestinian State

In the state-building process that followed the early 1990s, Palestinian women activists concentrated their forces on working out a political agenda able to focus on women’s rights and women’s empowerment, starting with the daily lives of ordinary women. In particular, the majority of interviewees I met have represented themselves as ‘nationalists’, working under the PLO umbrella and in the emerging institutions of the Palestinian National Authority, and as ‘secularists’, believing in the establishment of a Palestinian independent state in which religion should not interfere in the public space. In a general initial euphoria, many women’s organisations assumed the necessity of moving towards an innovative political stage where women’s rights might become primary objectives for a real emancipation along with the national independence. As underlined by Khitam Saafin from the *General Union of Palestinian Women*, the most decisive step should have been to adopt and work through a shared agenda between national and social issues:

⁵⁷ Concerning the issue on the debate between secularism/religion and feminism with a specific focus on women’s participation into Hamas, the scholar Islah Jad has published several works on the emergence of Muslim women’s activism as an important factor able to challenge the Western feminist discourses relating to the Palestinian political life (Jad, 1992, 2009).

“in 1994 we insisted on our rights as women, suggesting a strategy plan for Palestinian women in which we explained how to achieve future cooperation between all women’s movements and the governmental institutions towards developing women’s rights. We thought that we could work in a political unity”⁵⁸.

In addition, it was the first time that Palestinian women started to establish reliable political contacts with international women’s solidarity groups, who pressured them to sustain joint feminist initiatives and especially with the Israeli counterpart. A considerable number of committees of Palestinian women jointly with Israeli Jewish and international peace women activists (mainly European) proposed feminist alternatives, able to recognise differences among conflicting ethno-nationalist aims. The upsurge of the first *Intifadah* spread informal as well as formal meetings between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women: a wider political re-evaluation of priorities was recommended, but always through the framework of ethno-national struggles and the context of military occupation. However, the emergence of the so-called ‘transversal politics’⁵⁹ among women from opposite sides began to redefine mutual relationships in opposition to powerful ethno-national narratives, patriarchal institutions and conflict environments. Such initiatives have generated significant, yet controversial politics inside both societies by attempting to promote principles of recognition and reconciliation between struggling ‘Others’, as it will be discussed in the next chapters.

Nevertheless, the uprising of the second *Intifadah* in 2000 and the consequential ‘facts on the ground’⁶⁰ have even more weakened women’s everyday struggles as stated in an Amnesty International report that followed the explosion of violence after October 2000:

“Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have lived for most of their lives under Israeli occupation and have been facing a triple challenge to establish their rights: as Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation which controls every aspects of their lives, as women living in a society governed by patriarchal customs, and as unequal members of society subject to discriminatory laws” (Amnesty International, 2005).

⁵⁸ Interview with Khitam Saafin, Ramallah, October 19, 2009.

⁵⁹ It will represent the central aim of Part II, concerning women’s joint initiatives in detail.

⁶⁰ As a result of the Oslo process, the Israeli policies of separation inside the West Bank and of siege on the Gaza Strip have shaped an apartheid status through what has been called ‘Bantustanization’ of the Palestinian territories, denying the viability of a future Palestinian independent state completely.

Such a declaration has clearly shown how the dramatic effects of long-lasting military occupation on Palestinian women have diminished not only their political roles within the national movement, but especially their social conditions inside their own society.

In comparison with the first *Intifadah*, the internal crisis of Palestinian nationalism after 2000 has affected gender equality and women's activism in a profound way. In fact, although women's movements have focused on re-examining gendered dynamics between national and social aims, they were marginalised in the political debate. The profound instability that did not allow the translating of the self-determination process into an independent Palestinian state undermined the feasibility of obtaining political results for the Palestinian civil society, and in particular, for women's organisations (Johnson and Kuttub, 2001).

2. Palestinian Women Activists and Their National Project

Since the beginning of the 1970s, the spreading of women's standpoints within the Palestinian national movement has reconfigured social constructions of nationalism as a gendered phenomenon. Whilst on the one hand it has been developed through symbolic interpretations of collective identity, on the other hand the women's agenda has played a central function within the political definition of Palestinian nationalism and its structural components, including personal experiences as an integral part of Palestinian national politics.

2.1. Palestinian National Identity: What Meaning?

Diverse perspectives among women interviewees have been particularly significant in relation to the emphasis that each of them gave to the meaning of 'Palestinian identity'. This expression has been founded on their own awareness and willingness, in most cases as the reaction to their exclusion from the mainstream narrative in a context of military occupation and statelessness. Women's consciousness of nationalist issues has undergone numerous changes within Palestinian society and, in particular, concerning their hostility towards conventional political and social roles. As

illustrated in the previous paragraph by the historical emergence of the interconnection between national narrative identity and women's feminist viewpoints, the scholar Rita Giacaman has explained that "the feminist consciousness is an integral part of the general national consciousness, existing with it simultaneously in a constant dialectical change" (Giacaman in Sabbagh, 1996: 130).

Going in depth into the meaning of Palestinian identity, women's discourses have represented the result of historical transitions in which the multiplicity of expressions, directly correlated to political actions, have produced a differentiated variety of accounts. Such realities should be understood by the range of political experiences and challenging contexts that have affected Palestinian women activists. As a result of a number of interviewees' perspectives, interpretations of the relationship between women's liberation and national liberation have to be considered in parallel with the double disadvantage in which Palestinian women continue to live, by being victims of the Israeli military occupation within a male-dominated society.

Historically speaking (as just described in the preceding sub-paragraphs), Palestinian women have been essential components of the national movement, even though both internal and external obstacles have obscured their most innovative claiming of rights. In relation to women's role inside the national leadership, the director of the *Women's Studies Institute* at Birzeit University, Islah Jad, has pinpointed the problem maintaining that:

"the question is how to keep the balance between women's rights and national rights. It is important to keep an eye on what effects women in our society as issues related to violence, to legal reforms, to injustice in gender relations of any sort, and getting involved in the national struggle because this struggle gives women lots of legitimacy to push for their social rights"⁶¹.

From this point of view, Palestinian women activists have called for structural internal changes that would be able to increase political, economic, cultural spheres of the Palestinian people. In the majority of cases, by prioritising the external occupier force as primary a political object, women activists have attempted to solidify the nature of the relationship between their own suggested women's agenda and the national liberation aims.

⁶¹ Interview with Islah Jad, Birzeit University, Ramallah, November 2, 2009.

In fact, at the theoretical level as well as in their everyday struggles, most Palestinian women have continued to confirm strongly that their national identity has been mainly determined by the endless process of military occupation. In emphasising Palestine as their land, their nation, their personal life, their history and their future, younger women in particular have felt more confidence in the way of expressing their nationalist beliefs, rather than their opinions about gendered issues. Although at the beginning of my research I decided to focus on leading women who have been deeply involved in the current process of socio-political change, I have also met younger women who have just started their activism. Among them, Rania Khayyat, from the *Rural Women Development Society*, has stressed her nationalist identity, affirming:

“I believe that I belong to Palestine more than belonging to women. The nationality is more important than being woman. We are all together, men, women, and children; we are all Palestinians and we belong to Palestine. Palestine is our priority, even though women’s empowerment is fundamental to create a better society”⁶².

Dealing dialectically with diverse kinds of activism, women interviewees have advanced their main possible priorities: either the national liberation needs to prevail over the social agenda (including women’s empowerment), that could be implemented only as a secondary front, or a mutual development of both identities may build up parallel political strategies. Since the Israeli military occupation has been continuous and prolonged, women have continued to be embedded into multiple and often paradoxical nationalist views. However, apart from different political and social perceptions, what has been called ‘imagined community’ has mainly meant a future independent state in which self-determination and territorial sovereignty have persisted at the centre of the Palestinian national project. Using Simona Sharoni’s words:

“for Palestinians the imagined community came to be seen as a future sovereign Palestinian state. [...] There has been a broad consensus among Palestinians that the principles of national self-determination and territorial sovereignty are inseparable and crucial to the survival of the Palestinian people” (Sharoni, 1995:118).

⁶² Interview with Rania Khayyat, Ramallah, October 19, 2009.

At the beginning of almost every interview I conducted, Palestinian women emphasised touching events in which they were involved during and since their youth, including many examples of personal experiences in jail or connected to their closest relatives. As remembered by Naila Ayesh:

“as a result of my two arrests in the Eighties, I became more active in the political action. The national struggle is important for all Palestinians: this is why also for us, as women, it is our national identity that is predominant. The general understanding is that gender issues are part of the national struggle for freedom, in other words it is important to realise that both issues are very interconnected. Our society is traditionally patriarchal, thus males are dominating. So one aspect of our national struggle is to break this stigma and reaffirm that women must have an equal role in Palestinian society, and must equally take part as important actors in the leading of this struggle”⁶³.

For similar reasons, the majority of interviewees decided that they would be politically active due to everyday injustices under the Israeli military occupation, which imposed especially painful burdens on women. In accordance with their personal experiences, many of them started to be involved in the national resistance struggle because of their strong will to achieve a relevant role against the Israeli oppression.

2.2. *'Nationhood' and 'Womanhood' Starting with Individual Narratives*

Two other crucial features, familial space and geographical location, have been considered in order to reconstruct the narrative identity through which women have interconnected their own experiences in a continuum between past and present events. The following two specific cases were prevalently picked out by interviewees to explain their decision to become politically engaged: either growing up in problematic social and economic circumstances, such as in the Gaza Strip, or being born within a family of political activists in exile who moved from one Arab country to another. Concerning the first subject, the director of *Filastiniyat*⁶⁴, Wafa Abdel Rahman, has stressed that:

⁶³ Interview with Naila Ayesh, Ramallah, October 20, 2009.

⁶⁴ Since its initial activism in 2002 by a group of Palestinian women and men, it has questioned the Israeli military occupation as well as the corruption of the Palestinian political system. Concerning its works and perspectives, more details are available at <URL:<http://www.filastiniyat.org/en/perspective.php>>

“first of all, it is important to say that I am from Gaza, this is a central part of my identity. [...] At the same time, you are a woman, you want to carry the women’s agenda and social agenda, but you are under occupation and, therefore, you have to be part of the national struggle. Sometimes there is a conflict between the two identities, you should decide which one comes first, being a woman or being a Palestinian. For me, I could not take this decision, but if you ask me to introduce myself I say ‘I am a Palestinian woman’ and not ‘I am a woman from Palestine’”⁶⁵.

Especially during historic examples of resistance, such as after the 1967 war or the first *Intifadah*, social and economic adversities constrained even more women political activists to be permeated by nationalist demands. In this way, defining themselves as Palestinian women, rather than women who come from Palestine, has expressed the primary necessity of underlining the fact of their being part of the Palestinian collective narrative, and, only in a second stage, characterising another side of their identity, as women activists.

Another experience more related to the Diaspora frame has been told by Lama Hourani, a Palestinian civil-rights and feminist activist:

“I was born and raised up in Damascus, both of my parents were refugees. [...] My grandparents were used to talk about Palestine, my father and my mother were used to speak about this, for any Palestinian refugee Palestine is always the issue, it is sickness of home. I heard stories from my grandfather about his struggle against the British Mandate, and then against the Zionists that threatened Palestinians and obliged people to leave their villages. After that, the family was split, someone to Gaza and someone to Damascus”⁶⁶.

In other similar cases of women I encountered during my fieldwork, they have underlined the way in which they have faced up to political and social issues, starting with their own personal stories: this has been fundamental in order to enable them to determine and recognise the meanings as well as the effects of their political activism.

Palestinian women’s organisations have also contributed to the consolidation of the national Palestinian identity that has been interpreted by means of clashing viewpoints in relation to the increase of masculine power and its societal impacts. In the 1990s, in order to challenge the male-dominated political and social structures established by the Palestinian National Authority, the women’s agenda tried to propose alternative approaches. As explained by Amal Khreishe:

⁶⁵ Interview with Wafa Abdel Rahman, Ramallah, December 6, 2009.

⁶⁶ Interview with Lama Hourani, Ramallah, October 21, 2009.

“the concept of ‘human security’ is connected with the sovereignty of each citizen in a future national state: we cannot struggle in the direction of an authoritarian regime. We have realised that the Palestinian Authority is the reflection of the patriarchal hierarchy; thus, we need to develop other strategies, such as the Women Legal Charter that aims at including women from different political backgrounds focused on the effective participation of women in the public life”⁶⁷.

Articulating nationhood and womanhood in terms of mutual paradigms, women have been able to create theoretical discourses built on the connection between national liberation and their political activism. In defining their feelings and ideas on the subject, women have tried to reinforce the concept of a strong correlation between different narrative identities. Taking into account this challenging bond, the feminist activist Huda al-Imam has stated:

“it means to empower women, to have equal rights for women as for men, to legitimate equality between men and women within active political life, to raise women’s voice. I would like also to activate participation of women in politics, especially in the key roles; I would like to see women not only for a quota business, but for active roles. At the same time, as a Palestinian woman, I can say that we ask for equality in general, not only for women: we are working for equality for human beings, because we are looking for rights for all people, all the citizens of this country”⁶⁸.

Nevertheless, at the current status of progress they have not yet achieved either the majority of their political aims or concrete effects inside their society. As a consequence, their efforts to produce and reproduce their own autonomous space in which women could set up interconnections between rather contradictory identities have been put in danger through the present common sense of disillusionment directed towards possible political changes.

On the other hand, in a parallel analysis, some of them have openly expressed the view that their nationalism is a way of being Palestinian, but this is not the only element that may characterise their identity. As articulated by the general director of the

⁶⁷ Interview with Amal Khreisha, Ramallah, December 9, 2009.

⁶⁸ Interview with Huda al-Imam, East Jerusalem, September 20, 2010.

*Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC)*⁶⁹, Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas:

“nationalism is a way, a beginning to struggle, but it is not enough: my national identity is a way through which I discovered myself. My national identity was forced on me. This is who and what you are because you are a Palestinian, but indeed I need to think about all complexities of being a woman and, at the same time, of being a Palestinian”⁷⁰.

Concerning plural frameworks, the tight linkage between feminism and nationalism, through which the majority of Palestinian women I interviewed have expressed themselves, has aimed to combine the national liberation struggle with the women's feminist practices into a complementary political project.

3. Feminism(s) through Differences and Plurality

Since the earliest 1990s, the feminist question has also emerged within Palestinian women's organisations, addressing publicly and critically the deep interconnection between social agenda and national liberation. Defining 'women's exclusive perspective within the national movement', the differentiation between feminist and female has begun to appear in a few gender studies during the first *Intifadah*, such as the one presented by Julie Peteet. In her opinion, it has become crucial to make a distinction between the conceptual framework that stresses women's liberation struggle against the patriarchy system throughout a transformation of gendered relations, and another perspective that is more strongly linked to the nationalist commitment of each component of the Palestinian community, including women's active participation (Peteet, 1991).

⁶⁹ Established in East Jerusalem in 1991, it is a Palestinian independent, non-governmental, non-profit organisation that focuses on providing legal and social assistance to Palestinian women who are victims of abuse and violence. More reports are available at <URL://www.wclac.org/english/index.php>

⁷⁰ Interview with Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas, Ramallah, December 9, 2009.

3.1. *Questioning Feminism(s) through the Palestinian National Narrative*

On the subject of feminism, or better, feminism(s), many women interviewees had firstly chosen to become active participants in the political national life, and after a short while, to take part in women's groups. In this way, they have endeavoured to balance what has usually been considered the dichotomy between nationalist aims and feminist awareness. In examining the interviews that I collected during my fieldwork, both the personal and political transformations reported to me have confirmed an entrenched interlock between the role played by women within the Palestinian resistance movement and the need of women to shape and, thus, reconstruct their national identity in connection with a feminist perspective. Quite a lot of them have confirmed that "being a Palestinian woman and a feminist as well" may represent an intimate correlation between personal-emotional perceptions of their everyday reality and the collective struggle as oppressed people.

Within such a frame, the issue of feminism(s) needs to be understood through a wide and contradictory puzzle of diverse identities, histories and purposes. This has been well expressed by Wafa Abdel Rahman when she explained that:

"being a Palestinian woman means that you carry different burdens: the burden of the occupation and all the results of the occupation, but also you carry the burden of the social pressure, since you live in a conservative society. On the one hand you need to understand the stages that the society is going through and on the other hand you want to protect the identity, the principles and values that you have. You get into different battles on different levels with every political phase, and the battle takes different shapes"⁷¹.

In this sense, feminist analyses have considered the concept of being woman as inclusive of diverse narratives, where each one is situated and has a specific role in a plurality of identities. This is why, among the majority of Palestinian secular women activists, the significance of feminism

"reflects the process of women's empowerment in relation to make women free from all obstacles that the patriarchal system has built up. It means to change the power relationships of our society, in order to have justice not only equality. [...] Furthermore, in our situation, feminism means also freedom from military occupation"⁷².

⁷¹ Interview with Wafa Abdel Rahman, Ramallah, December 6, 2009.

⁷² Interview with Amal Khreishe, Ramallah, December 9, 2009.

Although a challenge such as this has not yet been able to start a transformation of the *status quo*, in the occupied Palestinian territories the feminist perspective has aimed to reflect women as autonomous protagonists of the national liberation struggle, whilst calling for both self-determination and social rights.

3.2. *Self-definition of Feminism(s): a Dilemma*

In accordance with the above-mentioned theorists who have sustained a feminist approach based on the ‘politics of difference’, a theoretical discussion such as this can be used to engage with another crucial topic, which concerns the self-definition of feminism(s) suggested directly by women I met. As already considered in the previous paragraphs, both theoretically and politically the notion of feminism(s) cannot be delineated as a monolithic paradigm, and instead it should be interpreted in numerous different ways. At times defined as an ideology, often as a way of life, and more as a way of thinking, feminism(s) reflect primarily individual/private processes, and, only in a second phase, may they be included within the wider context of societal structures. In my case study, Palestinian women activists have always been aware of the necessity of managing their feminist identity along with their nationalist agenda. Consequently, for many of the interviewees, the fact of defining themselves as feminists has signified struggling against the patriarchal system structured on a masculine construction of power-relations.

In order to analyse and assess such power-relations, women feminist activists have believed that a widespread understanding of gendered issues as basic ingredients of the national self-determination struggle can break the patriarchal tradition as well as encouraging an egalitarian and democratic society. By reflecting on their own experiences, being feminist has been mainly explained as a process through which they need to look at different, and often contradictory, narrative identities, and to recognise the complexity of each of them. In fact, as illustrated by Mariam Ikerawi from the *Jerusalem Center for Women* and project coordinator of the *Jerusalem Link*⁷³:

⁷³ In Part II the most prominent example of women’s joint initiatives that have started after Oslo will be represented, by examining the historical political process leading to the current deadlock.

“being woman is very hard, being woman and Palestinian is even harder. Being woman is the only identity I know. I have no other identity, just being a woman. In Palestine we always put the nationality first: I am Palestinian before being anything else. If I want to define myself I say ‘I am a Palestinian woman’. It will be ‘Palestine’, and then ‘woman’. I have the Israeli ID card, I have an Israeli travel document⁷⁴, I have a Jordanian passport, and none of these three classifications entitles me to any title of citizenship. Being a woman is the only identity I have. I am also a feminist, and feminism has lots of definitions, mine is ‘a deeper recognition of injustices’. I need a place where I can be myself”⁷⁵.

From a divergent perspective, a number of women, largely corresponding to the ones who have expressed nationalist priorities, have declared that feminism(s) is not an expression commonly acknowledged among the Palestinians. On the contrary, it is seen as a Western concept, something that has been shaped by other cultures and societies, and as something which could not be imported from other feminist experiences without considering Palestinian women’s consciousnesses in their own specific contexts and agenda. In relation to this prospect, Wafa Abdel Rahman has explained that:

“the word ‘feminism’ does not exist in the Arabic language, or at least it is not used by people. I do not consider myself as a feminist, but as a woman with a women’s perspective because I prefer to use the context and the language that my people really understand”⁷⁶.

In fact, on the one hand many women activists have needed to identify themselves with their society, while on the other hand they have wanted to effectively protect their own identities, principles, and values. In the majority of cases, the construction of a strong national identity through collective narratives has depended on the awareness of oppression experienced by the whole Palestinian people. In line with this viewpoint, many women have also recognised, as expressed here by Khitam Saafin, that:

“if we continue to argue only about these issues, we are going to separate women from the rest of our society. It is very hard to find out a balance between the two perspectives, at least at the theoretical level. In fact since the 1990s the

⁷⁴ Since 1967, a systematic policy of discrimination against Palestinians living in East Jerusalem has been strengthened by successive Israeli governments, in order to gain control over the entire city. Expropriations and house demolitions have continued to happen regularly, using legal means founded on the Israeli law that defines Palestinian Jerusalemites not as citizens but as ‘permanent residents of Israel’. More detailed documentation is available at <URL:<http://www.btselem.org/index.asp>>

⁷⁵ Interview with Mariam Ikerawi, Beit Hanina, October 11, 2009.

⁷⁶ Interview with Wafa Abdel Rahman, Ramallah, December 6, 2009.

most progressive parties have started to work on social programs linked to the national ones, implying a new support for the women's movement. However, at the same time a huge debate has taken place because if we decide to speak only about women's rights and feminism, we are going to divide our society"⁷⁷.

This discourse is evidently related to the impact of individual identities that characterise each woman's personal story: Palestinian women have experienced different situations and they have often prioritised nationalism over gender issues, rather than the contrary. 'Being woman' and at the same time 'being Palestinian' remains one of the most problematic questions, which has become much more complex within a *status quo* of prolonged military occupation. As a sort of dilemma, it has been expressed by the necessity of women activists to define themselves as Palestinians, and in a parallel way, to stress their determination in fighting for their rights as women, without forgetting any other narrative identity with which they are associated.

4. Feasible Alternatives to Nationalism: Which Feminist Challenge

Apart from a brief constructive period around the mid of 1990s, disagreements and divisions have continued to affect public discussion in relation to women's influence within the national agenda in all sections of Palestinian society⁷⁸. In the following years, the foremost Palestinian women's groups have debated strong and opposing proposals on whether to support or reject a feminist perspective inside the national resistance movement. As a result, the disconnection between women's and collective national rights has produced consequences on the internal system of women's activism, creating obstacles to the constitution of a shared feminist structure. In addition, the ongoing deterioration of the political as well as economic situation has added further difficulties in bridging national and social priorities through policies suggested by women's organisations, both secular and religious.

⁷⁷ Interview with Khitam Saafin, Ramallah, October 19, 2009.

⁷⁸ The presence of women in political life has continued to be rather weak: male hierarchy has prevailed in all levels of the society, keeping women outside leading positions of governmental institutions and employment opportunities.

4.1. *Women's Current Political Efforts*

For the most part of the last ten years (2001-2011), the relationship between the struggle for national liberation and the struggle against internal patriarchy has been placed in a critical position, since the women's agenda has been focused more on resisting occupation, postponing gender issues. Most leading women activists have understood that it has been not enough to gain awareness of their rights and duties, and they would need to make progress with structural collective changes. From their points of view, national aspirations and women's rights should not be separated, but they should instead complement each other in order to address what many women have described as the 'double burden' of military occupation and social pressure.

In analysing the effectiveness of women's struggles, the most useful approach has determined the necessity of negotiating a variety of identities according to women's agency and gendered roles. In the current impasse, such a discourse has implied problematic developments regarding the inability of women's political activism to provide alternatives in reconciling theoretical assumptions with concrete policies. By considering the present situation from within, Wafa Abdel Rahman has looked into the central question:

“as women's movement we made a mistake: we thought that the role of the Palestinian Authority was to end the occupation, and not the role of the civil society, including the women's movement; in that way, we did not pay enough attention to the social agenda. [...] It was a mistake because the occupation was not neutralised, but on the contrary with the eruption of the second *Intifadah* we have realised that the occupation is still influencing and affecting our lives. We can ignore neither the social issue nor the political one”⁷⁹.

Following this internal evaluation, a group of leading feminists have recommended a critical analysis about strategies to be developed, starting with unity among women's different realities in the common direction of working together. In this sense, *Islah Jad* has maintained:

“women are very capable to do many things in our society. We have lots of very strong characters who are women and in spite of this fact there is a lot of misconception about what women can do and what they cannot do. This has to be changed by the structure that affects such a misunderstanding within the

⁷⁹ Interview with Wafa Abdel Rahman, Ramallah, December 6, 2009.

political or economic or cultural or social life. It is not only about getting awareness of your rights and your duties, but it is about structural changes that should be taken”⁸⁰.

In reality, although a number of Palestinian feminists have self-criticised their failure in integrating their daily activism into a more powerful political input, the situation shows that these efforts have indeed not prevailed. As a consequence, the most important women’s socio-political engagements have not been translated into accepted roles which are able to deconstruct traditional patriarchal structures. In addition, other feminist viewpoints have evidenced how Palestinian women did not give adequate attention to women’s emancipation within the patriarchal society, rather than emphasising their participation in the national struggle.

4.2. Palestinian Women and Their Internal Divergences: What Future?

A further result of the current impasse within Palestinian women’s activism has resulted from the so-called process of ‘NGO-ization’, as coined by Islah Jad, in endeavouring to combine the feminist and nationalist agenda. She has explained this as:

“a term I use to denote the process through which issues of collective concern are transformed into projects in isolation from the general context in which they arise, without consideration of the economic, social and political factors affecting them. [...] This process is failing to empower women and it has transformed a cause for social change into a ‘project’ with a plan, timetable, and a limited budget, which is ‘owned’ and used by a small professional elite for the purpose of accountability vis-à-vis foreign donors” (Jad, 2004).

This critical view has been provoked by both the lack of accountability to women activists and by the excess of male-dominated elitism that has delegitimised women’s political influence. Moreover, the gap between theory and practice has continued to increase, reducing the achievement of viable political strategies in order to change the *status quo* and to develop not only theoretical constructions, but also real implications for women’s life.

Concerning internal divergences within the Palestinian women’s movement, in the latest decade, consequently to the demise of the Oslo Accords and the upsurge of the

⁸⁰ Interview with Islah Jad, Birzeit University, Ramallah, November 2, 2009.

second *Intifadah*, leading Palestinian women have been referred to as ‘frontliners’, a term which was initially proposed by the scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian. She describes these ‘frontliners’ thus:

“these women occupy the most visible positions in the field of activity in daily life within a conflict zone, positions of grave responsibility. [...] These women survive both the daily assaults against their quotidian activities and the psychological warfare that is endemic to a militarised zone” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009: 4-5).

In the Palestinian case more than ever, an ongoing interconnection between personal and political frames⁸¹ has contributed to delineate women’s critical consciousness about this controversial matter. As a result, even though women’s political activism has certainly been an influential factor among many in determining the national struggle of the entire collectivity, at the end few concrete actions or social changes have taken place, and several women’s issues remain unresolved.

Among women I interviewed, such a consideration has been emphasised by the deputy director of the *Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC)*, Dima Aweidah-Nashashibi:

“if you are a woman and you are involved in politics, it is not like other issues. There are many contradictions within our patriarchal society, even though as Palestinian women we are suggesting good examples to other women who live in conflict realities”⁸².

Even in the most progressive backgrounds, permanent contradictions have continued to prevail according to the fact that women may become fighters on the political level, but living within a patriarchal society. By taking as their main political mission different ways of resistance against the Israeli military occupation, such a double struggling front has been expressed by a constant dialectic dispute between the primary front of the liberation of land and the secondary front of women’s liberation. On this, the feminist academic Huda al-Imam has declared that:

⁸¹ From the well-known slogan ‘the personal is political’ that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, Western feminist groups have suggested new practices and modes of resistance. Later on, since the end of 1980s, the way of interconnecting the personal with socio-political dimensions has also become central in the Palestinian as well as in the Israeli women’s movements, enlightening women’s standpoints inside the situation of conflict and under military occupation. See detailed analyses on such a theme, starting with Tamar Mayer (1994) and Simona Sharoni (1995).

⁸² Interview with Dima Aweidah-Nashashibi, Ramallah, November 3, 2009.

“first of all, as Palestinian woman, I think that my main mission in life is resistance and I see that today there are many different ways of resistance against the Israeli occupation”⁸³.

On the other hand, one of the most demanding impacts has produced widespread feelings of political disaffection and criticism, which are growing even among those women who joined political organisations in the past. Nonetheless, in the course of changes that have affected time, places and socio-political structures of women’s networks and alliances, and have engendered increasing critiques with reference to controversial tensions between nationalist projects and women’s liberation, most of the women I met have emphasised these forms of political activism as being strictly interdependent.

By holding an alternative status in opposition to the hegemonic discourse, Palestinian women activists have attempted to create a political paradigm in order to look at their internal complexity, whilst being mindful of their differences. This is true of many of the stories from the women I interviewed who have given encouragement to the advancement of alternative debates. Women who have decided to pursue the path of political activism within such a fragmented and conflicting environment have expressed views typified by those of Rula Salameh, head of the board of the *Jerusalem Center for Women*:

“you cannot just concentrate on women’s rights if you continue to be under occupation and internal fights, but you always have to believe that the change will come from women, from us, we have to empower ourselves in order to empower our community”⁸⁴.

Taking this example, which enables us to contextualise one of the major standpoints common to all the Palestinian interviewees, it is evident that focusing only on the national liberation stance is to a certain extent reductive, since it has dealt not only with a question of national emancipation, but also it has involved a struggle against all forms of oppression and discrimination, starting with gender-based subjugations. Palestinian women, in both their personal and collective experiences, have continued to be closely associated with the aim for self-determination as opposed to submission to

⁸³ Interview with Huda al-Imam, East Jerusalem, September 20, 2010.

⁸⁴ Interview with Rula Salameh, Ramallah, October 21, 2009.

the Israeli military occupation, with this holding precedence over the establishment of an independent state and the internal challenge to work for a more pluralist and egalitarian society.

Overall, this analysis represents a picture of the complex and changing socio-political reality in which Palestinian women have sought to reshape new political strategies as well as by expanding the range of their forms of resistance. Assuming the significance of such a background of women's political mobilization, in the last chapter of the dissertation I will consider in more detail the most recent strategies and practices of non-violent resistance to the Israeli occupation undertaken by women activists in the West Bank, and, in a parallel way, I will attempt to discuss their grassroots political project within the current stalemate of a real feasible reconciliation among (un)equal enemies.

CHAPTER FOUR

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF ETHNO-NATIONAL IDENTITIES AMONG ISRAELI WOMEN

1. Jewish Women and Zionist Issues

In the following chapter I will explore the intricate panorama of Israeli women's political activism, from the time when the earliest Jewish communities arrived in the land of Palestine, and including the few decades since the founding of the state of Israel. In line with the phase defined by the second and third waves of immigration (the 'second aliyah' in the years 1904-1914 and the 'third aliyah' in the period 1919-1923 respectively), Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe supported the values of political Zionism, which had grown up in Europe as well as in the United States at the end of the XIX century, and became crucial within the development of Jewish society in historic Palestine.

1.1. Zionism and Its Standpoint towards Gendered Relations

A primary founding pillar of the Jewish women's movement was principally encouraged by the Labour Zionists and started with the development of the *kvutza* (the precursor of the *kibbutz*), in which women worked in communal kitchens and laundries (Israeli in Bernstein, 1992: 183-191). Nonetheless, the prevalent gendered division of roles supported discriminatory gaps between men and women within the increasing ethno-national narrative identity that started to gain public recognition. Already in the 'pre-state' Israeli society, women workers had attempted to participate actively in the socio-political life (in opposition to the situation that they had lived with in their places of origin), but they did not expect to face similar difficulties and to be relegated to the performance of secondary functions⁸⁵. Inside the pioneers' movement that was committed to the main Zionist standpoints, Jewish women had to fight firstly not as

⁸⁵ Concerning these issues, see the analyses drawn by the leading scholar Deborah Bernstein (1992, 2000).

women, but as Jews, by accomplishing strong determination and idealism. In fact, for the period of the state in-the-making, the general attitude of the majority of women was to deny every difference between men and women in order to exalt aggressive masculinity and to reach the mythological dream of Eretz Israel.

By the end of 1930s, diverse narratives provided illustrations of a number of grassroots women's organisations that tried to obtain political space, challenging definitions of power related to the Zionist project, so as to put into practice alternative proposals of cooperation between Jews and Arabs⁸⁶. From another viewpoint, further historical narrations reported on women's involvement in paramilitary organisations during the escalation of violence between Palestinian natives and Zionist pioneers (Herzog in Naveh, 2003: 9-11). Such documentation shows that, from the earliest phases of the conflict, the dichotomy characterised by the terms 'home front' and 'battle front' has been applied to produce gendered inequalities in many aspects of everyday life. During the establishment of the first Jewish settlements pre-1948, Jewish women were not participants in a fair division of labour within what were to become the public institutions of the future state, and instead were subject to power subordination between women and men.

Such a gendered dominance has been also explained by the fact that in emerging nations founded on strong ethno-national narrative identities, as is the case with the Jewish state, women's issues have usually remained in the backdrop of social and political priorities. Taking into account the active role of women within their own national politics, two approaches have been theorised: the first view, 'working from without', focused on women's mobilization and their autonomous attitudes towards male-dominated mainstream institutions; the second standpoint, 'acting from within', implied women's integration and collaboration with conventional centres of political power (Yishai in Fuchs, 2005: 199-202).

This increased in 1948, as a consequence of the Palestinian tragedy (*Nakba*), when Israel was established as a Jewish state, or better as state of the entire Jewish nation, in 'a land with no people for the people with no land', following up on the vision of the Zionist mainstream that proclaimed a state governed by and for all Jews. In

⁸⁶ Such remarkable examples will be illustrated in the second part of the thesis, and specifically in relation to the historical and conceptual roots of Palestinian-Israeli joint initiatives. Since the earliest years of the XX century, interactions between Palestinian Arabs and Jews were quite frequent, even though prejudices and stereotypes quickly prevailed, discouraging personal connections as well as aggravating hostilities between opposite sides.

a parallel but conflicting way to the Palestinian narrative, also for Israeli Jews the notion of a national ‘imagined community’ can be interpreted through the scholar and feminist activist Simona Sharoni’s analysis:

“yet, while Jews realized their dream and established a Jewish state, this has come at the expense of Palestinians, whose desire to fuse national self-determination with territorial sovereignty remains unfulfilled. This turn of events has in many ways formed the basis for the present conflict” (Sharoni, 1995: 118).

In the aftermath of the first Arab-Israeli war, women’s modestly-sized political space was removed from the public arena: their family roles as mothers and bearers of children started to be brought out in terms of ‘mothers of soldiers’ and ‘mothers of the nation’ (Berkovitch, 1997). Through the *Declaration of Independence* (1948) and the *Women’s Equal Rights Law* (1951) Israeli women were deceived into thinking they could acquire rights as well as equal opportunity in the new socio-political scenery, but these two pieces of legislation never had constitutional force⁸⁷ (Raday in Swirski and Safir, 1991: 18-28).

In line with what happened at the institutional level, the original goal of establishing an egalitarian state in which gendered equality would be attainable has remained no more than an ideal. In addition, women’s active inclusion in the construction of the state has not been supported by the Israeli male-dominated society. In this sense, the marginalisation of women’s issues has been one of the major consequences of the lack of separation between the state and the military, which has gained a primary status in the Israeli nationalist pattern, reinforcing male superiority and disregarding social changes.

1.2. Israeli Jewish Women within Militarism, Security, and Reproduction

Since the time of its establishment, the Israeli military has begun to permeate every aspect of daily life, defining the socio-political dynamics in Israeli society.

⁸⁷ A further crucial element, which will be covered in the next paragraphs, concerns the existence of different citizenship rules for Jews and non-Jews (in particular Palestinian Arabs), with the aim of dividing the Israeli society in matters of privileges and power-relations.

Militarisation has risen to prominence with the symbol of ‘Sabra’⁸⁸, the ethos of heroism that has represented militant, arrogant and masculine power, working to stress the idea of ethno-national survival. As Simona Sharoni has demonstrated in her convincing analysis, “from 1948 onward, Israeli women had no space to assert themselves outside the confines of their role. [...] In order to be part of the Jewish state they had to constantly support and express gratitude for their male ‘liberators’ and ‘protectors’” (Sharoni, 1995: 96). The Six-Day war in 1967 and the Yom Kippur war in 1973 served to reinforce the centrality of the military, and a consequent trend directed towards celebration of strong masculinity and the taking for granted of the women’s contribution to the home front.

In the most recent years, a number of women political activists have accepted an assimilationist idea of gendered equality, especially in relation to the women’s role inside the army⁸⁹, through what has been defined as the ‘sameness’ approach, and in contrast with the feminist ‘politics of difference’ (Rimalt, 2003). In effect, the military service experience has been employed to determine a hierarchy among each sector of Israeli society, from servers to non-servers, women and men, Jews and Palestinians.

In a parallel way, the security concept has been one of the fundamental assumptions at the basis of the establishment of the Jewish state, not only as a political frame, but also as a cultural element within Israeli everyday life. The common awareness of constant threat to the national security has always been predicated along with its evocative implications and political disputes (Herzog, 1998). In the original Zionist prospect, the construction of the Israeli nationalist collective narrative has been particularly reinforced as well as justified throughout by interpreting the processes and practices of security as firmly gendered. Since the beginning, the centrality of such a discourse has intensified deep reactions within both the Jewish and Palestinian communities in Israel, including arguments inside the Israeli women’s peace organisations, as will be discussed in the course of this chapter and in the following one, which is focused on Palestinian-Israeli women’s joint initiatives.

⁸⁸ From *sabar*, the cactus, which is tough and prickly on the outside and sweet on the inside. This image has taken on an important role in the construction of the new generation of Jews born in Israel, who have been characterised as strong, brave and aggressive men in antithesis to the weak and persecuted ‘Diaspora Jews’.

⁸⁹ Since the establishment of the Jewish state, the army, throughout the period of three-year compulsory conscription for men and women, has been the central component of national security. It has permeated everyday societal positions within the Israeli people, and above all the divisions between Jews and Palestinians (who are excluded from the service) as well as the gendered hierarchy between men and women (who, for example, do not take part in combat operations in the battlefield).

In a society built on the myth of militarised masculinity in the private as well as in the public sphere, the Israeli case has proved to be an exceptional framework, one that the scholar Tami Jacoby has defined as a ‘mobilization-marginalization phenomenon’, through which Israeli women have been encouraged to join in the political system. They face ‘mobilization’, but on the other hand they also have to face up to the militarised patriarchal daily reality - ‘marginalization’ (Jacoby, 2005: 8-9). From this perspective, divisions between private and public contexts have become more flexible, even though the powerful separation of roles between men and women has been solidly incorporated into forms of militarised masculinity.

In the Zionist discourse, another crucial issue to be taken into account is the national reproduction as a precondition for the survival of the national collectivity, and of increasing Jewish domination in Israel and enlarging the body of Jewish people all over the world (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989: 92-106). Regarding women as biological reproducers of the nation, Israeli governments have adopted numerous natalist policies, from child allowances to maternity leave, in order to encourage women to have more children (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 26-31). Considered in terms of patriotic motherhood, this conceptual framework has developed a conventional image in which the Jewish woman has to comply with both national and familial functions.

Furthermore, it has dealt with the internal Israeli disparity among Ashkenazi Jews, Mizrahi Jews, and Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the way in which class and ethnic divisions stand in relation to the national reproduction issue. It has meant that the ethno-national project has absorbed Israeli women into the cultural-political identification of wives and mothers to strengthen the Zionist collective myth of a state where gender, class, and ethnic discriminations have continued to be maintained. From this point of view, the perpetuation of patriarchal traditions in the family as well as in public life has obliged women to be passive components of nationalist political strategies.

Whilst the ‘Other’ has been always considered an enemy, and Israeli daily life has been mainly founded on militaristic approaches, women’s feminist organisations have attempted to build up a political trajectory that could bring together women’s issues along with ethno-national roots and deep-seated historical narratives. This is the reason why, since the majority of Israeli women political activists have understood that military occupation is also a feminist question, the strict linkage between feminism and pacifism has become an essential awareness of their internal discourse. They have

needed to contextualise their own struggle within the Israeli militarised society as well as to acquire knowledge on how to deal with the notion of ‘Other’ inside Israel and towards Palestinian women activists. In this perspective, the significance of showing the development of Israeli women’s activism in relation to the diverse historical and political phases that have characterised the Israeli society itself as well as the dichotomy in its relationship with the Palestinians under military occupation represents the core of such an analysis. As will be examined in the next paragraphs, the heterogeneous Israeli women’s framework has challenged a problematic reality where unbalanced power and lack of recognition have structured further boundaries to be defeated.

2. ‘Feminism(s)’ and ‘Pacifism’ as Political Alternatives

Taking a parallel approach, as I have examined the most significant experiences of Palestinian women, I will also examine the Israeli case, where I will focus on the internal challenging identities as well as the roles of women activists⁹⁰. In particular I will consider the specificity of women’s peace movements that have struggled for the end of the military occupation over the Palestinian territories and have rejected the use of violence within the ongoing conflict. In such a problematical equilibrium between women’s issues and ethno-national narrative identities, the majority of Israeli women I interviewed have questioned what the meanings of feminism(s) and peace are within their specific ethno-national backgrounds in relation to the military occupation. In this way, attitudes and actions towards women of the ‘Other’ side, largely identified with the Palestinian enemy, will be observed throughout the following paragraphs.

2.1. Earliest Feminism(s): Struggling with Women’s Oppression

At the beginning of the 1970s, in the immediate aftermath of the Yom Kippur war, the earliest feminist experiences started to take place in Israel, especially in Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Starting with two seminars on women’s issues given by the philosopher Marcia Freedman and the psychologist Marilyn Safir at Haifa University,

⁹⁰ Other forms of Israeli Jewish women’s political activism have included nationalist-religious groups, founded on Zionist and deep-seated biblical ideologies.

Israeli women activists began a new consciousness-raising pathway that created the first steps towards the growth of feminist approaches in Israel (Swirski and Safir, 1991). The initial use of 'feminism(s)' by Israeli Jewish women was adopted reflecting similar experiences conducted by Western women, especially in the United States, and upholding feminist campaigns about women's liberation and women's rights.

Another feature to be mentioned is the split, also in Israel, between liberal and radical feminisms: the main theoretical divisions have been related to familial and social constructions of gender, and to socio-economic boundaries across women from different classes (Sharoni, 1995: 102-104). At that time, detailed researches about causes, effects and practices of women's repression sought to carry out investigation within the male-dominated and militarised Israeli society. The awareness of a strong Israeli Jewish nationalism (and its militaristic consequences) was not relevant in the public discourse; rather the contemporary closeness of war to home aggravated women's frustrations and revealed gendered inequality that had been hidden for decades by the Zionist masculine culture.

With the aim of focusing on women's systematic oppression by patriarchal institutions as well as discriminations among class and ethnic differences, Israeli feminist women began to prepare a common ground for future critical changes. After a few years, in 1977, an all-women political party called *Women's Party* showed publicly how diverse kinds of oppression, mainly based on gender, economic, political and social disparities, were distributed within Israeli society and linked to each other; nonetheless, the party did not eventually succeed in achieving the election of any representative (Freedman in Misra and Rich, 2003: 1-7).

It was also the first time that Israeli women's organisations recommended the end of military occupation of the Palestinian territories and gave their complete support towards Palestinian women. A decade later, during 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, a number of Israeli women expressed explicitly their opposition to the war. Two particularly critical women's peace groups came out in that period, *Women Against the Invasion of Lebanon*, later renamed *Women Against the Occupation*, and *Parents Against Silence*, also called *Mothers Against Silence*⁹¹ (Sharoni, 1995: 106-109). Their

⁹¹ The Israeli society and its political leaderships were more ready to accept the adoption of the motherhood concept, rather than the feminist one. For this reason, *Parents against Silence* activists chose to present themselves as moderate people, so as to appear respectable and legitimised by Israeli public opinion (Gillath in Swirski and Safir, 1991: 142-145). Another well-known example emerged in 1997 through the *Arba Imahot - Four Mothers* movement, which used non-violent practice with the intention

hostility towards the Lebanon invasion was intended to interconnect Israeli Jewish women's experiences along with Palestinian women's suffering, caused by the Israeli military repression not only in Lebanon, but also in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Jacoby, 2005: 70-71). Despite encountering extreme obstruction as regards political demonstrations, and failing to carry Israeli public opinion, they increased their involvement in solidarity campaigns and initiatives which directly involved them with Palestinian women.

From those experiences, numerous women started to join in feminist political actions. As one of the founders of the earliest groups in Haifa, Edna Zaretsky-Toledano, has described:

“I became a radical feminist listening to these women who encouraged us to expose ourselves, our stories to other women, fighting against the harsh reality and the social impositions. I felt I must be responsible, I must know, I cannot let it be, because it is my responsibility to prevent such events. [...] I cannot forget and go on with my life. As time goes by I cannot allow myself to feel hopeless because it will mean I have stopped struggling. Anyway I feel very desperate about the current situation, very alienated to my own society. Being a Jew in Israel, I know that occupation means that I am still living in the dominant side”⁹².

Although twenty years later the situation has by now increasingly worsened, throughout the first *Intifadah* Israeli Jewish women activists have represented one of the most influential peace actors within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, though representing a quite modest number, women activists have attempted to mobilise political commitment to peace and, in a parallel way, to support joint bridges with Palestinian women from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In relation to women's role within the Israeli peace movement, one of the leading representatives of peace and human rights activism, Gila Svirsky, stated that:

“the co-operative spirit was a direct product of the sense of urgency we each felt about *doing* things, and not just talking. We were determined to use our combined strength to make a powerful statement” (Svirsky in Abdo and Lentin, 2002: 237).

of advocating the withdrawal of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) from South Lebanon. In linking personal and political motivations, they wanted to achieve the support of the common people and media, by means of advancing non-violent paradigms. Like many other peace initiatives, this movement split up in less than a year (Hermann in Stephan, 2009: 251-262).

⁹² Interview with Edna Zaretsky-Toledano, Haifa, November 10, 2009.

The feminist politics of refusing oppression and killings engendered by their own governments has started to penetrate every sphere of women's lives, creating a deep-rooted sense of responsibility for changing Israeli society from within. Since that time, the feminist approach, as a way of looking at the world and understanding the contemporary reality, has tried to connect private life with political activism within often contradictory narrative identities.

2.2. *Feminism(s) and Military Occupation*

Since the early 1990s, Israeli women's peace organisations, among them *Women in Black*, *Reshet*, *Shani (Women Against Occupation)*, *Israeli Women's Peace Net*, and *Women's Organization for Women Political Prisoners*, have gradually recognised that women's issues are strictly correlated with the political structures of militarisation, oppression and inequality which combine to keep Palestinians in a subjugated reality of occupation. One such organisation, *Women in Black* (called in Hebrew *Nashim Beshahor*), founded by seven Israeli Jewish pacifist women in 1988, has become well-known within the worldwide network of women against injustice, war, militarism and every other form of violence. They have called attention to the difficulties of the everyday life of the Palestinian people under military occupation (in particular focusing on women's status): during their weekly demonstrations, they dress in black and stand silently in a public space holding placards that say 'Stop the Occupation' in Hebrew, Arabic, and English (the so-called *vigil*). Individual and collective discourses are interlinked: as women and as citizens they have called to their governments to end the military occupation, by demonstrating their complete dissent from mainstream Israeli internal policies. In doing this, *Women in Black* have taken inspiration from past examples of women's non-violent struggles such as the *Black Sash* women who challenged the South Africa apartheid system.

The events of the subsequent decade, above all the uprising of the second *Intifadah*, the construction of the Wall and the expansion of 'Bantustans' across all the occupied Palestinian territories, have deeply affected the Israeli peace scenario, and women's organisations as well. New feminist realities have grown up, such as the

*Coalition of Women for Peace*⁹³, which has embraced many women's groups in addition to the historic ones as *TANDI (Movement of Democratic Women for Israel)* and *Bat Shalom (Daughter of Peace)*⁹⁴. In order to support its main goal of ending military occupation, the Coalition has addressed fundamental political intents by involving women in peace negotiations, promoting campaigns against the extreme militarisation of Israeli society, advocating equality and social justice for all citizens and in solidarity with the Palestinian side.

Two other remarkable initiatives are worthy of mention at this point. These are: *New Profile - The Movement for the Civil-ization of Israeli Society* (a feminist organisation established by both women and men, with the aim of opposing and fighting militarism as a key element of the Israeli power structure, and especially of preventing the maintenance of a militaristic mind-set); and *Machsom Watch* (a women's group which has the political objective of monitoring checkpoints and reporting abuses committed by the Israeli military towards Palestinians). The former, *New Profile*, does not rely on a single definition of feminism, but instead its practices have attempted to transform Israel from a militaristic society to a civil society. By keeping in mind the vision of an egalitarian future, whilst maintaining a strong critique of the *status quo*, they have highlighted the way in which militarisation has permeated every portion of people's lives, and apparently left them without alternative choices⁹⁵. On the other hand, women from *Machsom Watch* have focused on observing and documenting daily human rights violations at the checkpoints, as unfortunately these are one of the most well-known instances of the maintenance of Israeli military occupation over the Palestinian territories⁹⁶.

Throughout this historical and socio-political discussion, my purpose is directed towards examination of the complex interrelation between ethno-nationalism, in particular the Zionist roots of the Jewish state, and the experiences of Israeli women peace activists that have adopted approaches and practices in opposition to the *status*

⁹³ The ten members of the Coalition are: *Machsom Watch*, *Women in Black*, *Bat Shalom*, *Bat Tzafon for Peace and Equality*, *TANDI - Movement of Democratic Women in Israel*, *New Profile*, *The Fifth Mother*, *WILPF - Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, *Noga Feminist Journal*, *NELED - Women for Coexistence*. News about political campaigns and long-term projects are available at <URL:<http://www.coalitionofwomen.org>>

⁹⁴ *TANDI* and *Bat Shalom* will be discussed in depth in chapter five, concerning historic women's joint initiatives that have represented the most significant cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women.

⁹⁵ Interviews with Dorothy Naor, Jerusalem, November 30, 2009, and with Ruth Hiller, Netanya, September 5, 2010.

⁹⁶ Interview with Ronny Perlman, Jerusalem, November 3, 2009.

quo of military occupation. As one of the founders of *Bat Shalom*, Molly Malekar, has explained:

“if you want equal rights as woman you cannot disconnect your struggle from the political context. And if the political context is the ongoing war that has given right to militarism in our society, you have to struggle in a double way. Militarism will never allow equal rights for women, even for Jews”⁹⁷.

Indeed, Israeli women activists have needed to struggle more and more to put into practice what they have theoretically recommended, as the feminist peace activist Erella Shadmi has confessed:

“nowadays women do not have a feminist vision of peace. The problem is that there is no difference between the feminist peace movement and the general peace movement. I felt frustrated by the feminist movement, by the pacifist movement, by the Israeli leftists. I tried to talk about it but I have not received any interest from women regarding these issues”⁹⁸.

In a similar context, from shifting and contradictory standpoints, Israeli women’s peace activism has persisted in attempting to converge its political focus on oppression and inequalities, underlining the close connection between gender discriminations, increasing militarisation and ongoing military occupation. Daily violence has intensified women’s awareness of their potential to initiate individual and collective actions, even by breaking the most dominant rules and ideals that the army has used to marginalise peace activism. Yet the existing gap, based mainly on the prevalent position of Ashkenazi middle-class women towards more oppressed and silenced women from the Mizrahi Jewish and Palestinian communities, has reproduced internal obstacles. The growth of political alternatives has been inhibited by the growth of class and ethnic discriminations, even within the Israeli women’s movements, as the following analysis will demonstrate. Even more, in a settler-colonial state such as Israel, issues of ethno-national identities along with class positions have to be explored, in order to understanding the complex articulation of marginalised and silenced people, by giving space to unheard voices such as Palestinian and Mizrahi Jewish women.

⁹⁷ Interview with Molly Malekar, Jerusalem, October 19, 2009.

⁹⁸ Interview with Erella Shadmi, Haifa, September 14, 2010.

3. Ashkenazi and Mizrahi⁹⁹ Women: Clashing Voices from Within

The Israeli Jewish social landscape is composed of several and contrasting communities, but it may be illustrated through two main broad categories referring to: *Ashkenazi*, Jewish population of European, American, and Russian origin, that means in general Western Jews who correspond to thirty-two per cent of the total population of Israel and who symbolise the ruling economic, political, and social elite; and *Mizrahi*, Jewish people of North African, Middle Eastern, and Asian origin, as literally indicated by the term ‘Eastern communities’, who represent forty-eight per cent of the Israeli people even though they are at the margins of power. Since the foundation of the Jewish state, the Israeli establishment has developed unbalanced policy goals, generating a hierarchical status in which Ashkenazi Jews have been in the dominant position, followed by Mizrahi Jews, and finally by Palestinian citizens of Israel. It has produced internal instability as well as conflicts within Israeli society in general, and also among minority subgroups, such as women’s organisations.

At the economic and social level, Mizrahi politics has tried to develop emerging alternatives to the Ashkenazi predominance: ethnic identification and intra-cooperation between low-grade communities have induced Mizrahi struggles to challenge current inequalities. In fighting against their weaker position, Mizrahi people have spread some radical proposals that have often generated contradictory critiques. On the one hand, the so-called *old Mizrahi* model has questioned the Ashkenazi-dominated system, asking for a real integration with a view to achieving more comfortable standards of life within Israeli society, while on the other hand, the *new Mizrahi* approach has tried to overcome mainstream Zionism and face up to the Ashkenazi hegemony¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁹ I use *Mizrahi* instead of *Sephardi* because it is considered politically stronger in advocating their rights towards the Ashkenazi ruling minority. In particular, it has been used by the majority of women that I interviewed to define themselves, or to describe internal Israeli Jewish cleavages.

¹⁰⁰ With regard to Mizrahi politics and its internal differentiation, it is relevant to understand the emergence of radical political responses, such as the *Black Panthers* movement, the ultra-orthodox party *Shas*, and the *Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition*. For a brief and clarifying description of Mizrahi politics over the last twenty years, refer to Sami Chetrit (2000, 2010).

3.1. *The Historic Split between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Women*

Due to the existence of the above-mentioned internal Jewish divisions, it is necessary to reflect on the role of Mizrahi women, and in particular to throw light upon their conflicting perspectives with regard to ethnic identity (Ashkenazi or Mizrahi) and national identity (Israeli Jews). In relation to the main issues of women's peace activism, Mizrahi women have been constantly marginalised because of their subordinate status in society since they have not been considered as an autonomous voice within Israeli feminist circles. Until the mid 1990s, Israeli women's organisations were predominantly composed of Ashkenazi women, and lacking in representation from the so-called 'Other', or in other words the majority of Mizrahi, Palestinian, Bedouin, Ethiopian and women foreign workers (although the Ashkenazi side has never openly admitted internal discrimination).

However, women from underprivileged non-Ashkenazi communities started to become aware of their deprived conditions by calling for attention to be given to their specific needs and sharing their oppressed experiences. The turning point occurred during the tenth annual national feminist conference held in Givat Haviva in 1994: a group of Mizrahi women, through accusing Ashkenazi women of not representing their ideals of sisterhood, solidarity, and equality, decided to abandon the meeting and, thus, to cause the Israeli feminist movement to split. Since that time, Mizrahi women have organised separate conferences where they have explained their own consciousness as an alternative to the Ashkenazi one, speaking openly about their double subjugated experiences of ethnic and gendered oppression. That historic moment has been described by Erella Shadmi, who joined *Women in Black* and the *Coalition of Women for a Just Peace*, by means of the following sensitive words:

“the cry of the Mizrahi feminists exploded into our faces. They rebelled furiously and bitterly against the domination by Ashkenazi women of both the feminist and the women's peace movements. [...] For the first time in my life I was forced to face my Ashkenazi identity and to recognise the privileges that come with it and the system of oppression with which I was collaborating. I spoke about the whiteness of the feminist movement, I do not want to be part of it” (Shadmi, 2003: 53).

On the other hand, numerous Ashkenazi women have condemned the Mizrahi women's lifestyle as being traditional and patriarchal, and one which they have

perpetuated by neither controlling their own bodies nor asking for their rights. Furthermore, in relation to the religious issue, most of the Ashkenazi feminists have accused Mizrahi women of making a decision to maintain their traditional Orthodox lifestyle. The majority of Mizrahi women do not consider such a matter as one of the pressing priorities to be discussed within the feminist agenda neither they want to ignore their religious traditions. In fact, from a Mizrahi point of view, real changes which act against patriarchy and women's oppression should start within their own conventional social system¹⁰¹.

Indeed, in the last years, internal ethnic divisions have become ever more visible as result of a deeper socio-economic gap between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi women's conditions of life. In this sense, basic principles, above all those of equality and social justice that have historically been the foundation of feminist struggles, have been restricted. As a matter of fact, Mizrahi women, whose economic situation has been always inferior when compared to that of the Ashkenazi women, have to fight primarily for survival against poverty and unemployment (Dahan-Kalev, 2009).

3.2. Mizrahi Women's Politics and Their 'Feminism of Colour'

Hostilities between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi women have been caused by their distinct agendas established on different troubles and needs, especially with regard to Western feminist concepts. When Mizrahi women began to organise themselves separately, they focused on two main issues: the critical analysis of the Israeli internal situation and the political proposal of movement towards a multicultural approach through which every community could be equally represented (Dahan-Kalev, 2001). As demonstrated by the implicit connection between social and civil rights, Ashkenazi hegemony has been reproduced not only on the theoretical level, but in everyday situations. The first emergence of the effects of asymmetry in the relations between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi women emerged within the sphere of career and self-fulfilment, being manifested in opposition to low wages and labour-intensive jobs.

¹⁰¹ To explore Mizrahi women's experiences and consequential challenges between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi feminists in greater depth, see above all Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Smadar Lavie, and Erella Shadmi.

Internal disputes about inequalities between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi women have been based on two interconnected elements in terms of ethnic conflict within the whole of Israeli society, and social conflict among disadvantaged working-class women. Ethnic and class cleavages have created uncomfortable and challenging feelings in non-Ashkenazi women, who have taken up contradictory disputes against Ashkenazi privileged hegemony. Within the Israeli social gaps, Mizrahi women's politics has contributed to the raising of an alternative consciousness in combining their struggles, spanning peace and social justice issues. For this reason, Mizrahi women have attempted to address their political action by enlarging the feminist peace movement in order to achieve a more egalitarian status. In fact, they have suggested challenging debates with women from different narrative identities, embracing Palestinian Arabs, Ethiopians, Russians, and in general from poorer working class realities (Dahan-Kalev in Medding, 2007: 193-199).

Going in depth into Mizrahi women's activism, their main renowned organisation is *Ahoti (My Sister)*, which was founded in 1999 in accordance with the most crucial feminist standpoint of sisterhood. Within multicultural and multi-identity feasible perspectives they have pointed towards women's social-economic empowerment. *Ahoti*, along with the *Tmura Center* that is involved in law issues, has provoked a sort of revolution within the Israeli feminist mainstream, questioning Ashkenazi leadership and fighting for political, socio-economic and cultural equality among the heterogeneity of ethno-national identities inside Israel. In taking this position, they have broken the silence around the current socio-political and economic situation, as well as the consequent psychological deprivations in which Mizrahi women are used to living. One of the leading activists, Shula Keshet, has underlined a meaningful relationship between women's oppression, socio-economic issues, and ethnic identities, saying that:

“poor women are the majority in Israel and most of them are women of colour, since in Israel the economic status is really going hand in hand with the ethnic background. [...] Mizrahi feminism and our organization *Ahoti*, we are based on ‘feminism of colour’ in the sense of a multi-cultural feminism able to build networks between unprivileged women from various ethno-national backgrounds. We want to create the alternative way through which we are talking about equal rights, equal representation, in an equal space for women

from different contexts. Such a politics, along with socio-economic initiatives, is coming from the grassroots that should be able to offer a new agenda”¹⁰².

Promoting the idea of a strong connection between narrative identity and individual/collective oppression, Mizrahi women’s initiatives have advocated egalitarian representation not only for themselves, but for most of the weakest ethnic collectivities within Israeli society. In her contribution to such a debate, Erella Shadmi has summarised that Ashkenazi women have responded to a possible threat to their power and privileges in two contradictory ways:

“on the one hand, by seeking power through allying themselves with Ashkenazi hegemony and Western feminists like themselves; on the other hand, by slowly beginning to alter both those racist attitudes, and the practices which accompany them in the work. The latter is, as we shall show, the only option for new women’s left politics” (Shadmi in Leon, 2004: 156-157).

Considering upper-class Ashkenazi elite feminism unable to focus strategically on Mizrahi feminist daily narratives, most Israeli women’s groups have ignored intra-Jewish socio-economic and political disparities. As highlighted by one of the most critical Mizrahi feminist scholars, Smadar Lavie, through using Edward Said’s concept presented in his *Question of Palestine*, Ashkenazi peace feminists have continued to struggle towards ending the military occupation of the Palestinian territories, instead considering their responsibility for the internal Israeli oppression of non-European Jews. In this background,

“the Question of Palestine enables the Ashkenazi peace feminists to avoid sharing their power, prestige, and money with the Mizrahi internal Others of Israeli society. Mizrahi feminists see great irony in the contrast between Ashkenazi feminists’ emphasis of human rights for the Palestinians and silence on human rights for the Mizrahim” (Lavie, 2011: 65).

As these words demonstrate, future political alternatives might probably be facilitated by Mizrahi people, and, above all, by Mizrahi women who are doubly oppressed through patriarchal society and ethno-national hierarchy. Nevertheless, this prospect would create further boundaries, due to the existence of internal divisions

¹⁰² Interview with Shula Keshet, Tel Aviv, December 7, 2009.

within minority communities, primarily Palestinians and Mizrahim, and to their strong identity of self-determination.

4. Another Considerable Minority: Palestinian Women in Israel

Moving away from the Israeli Jewish multifaceted background, another large proportion of the society has been composed of Palestinians, who have been constantly exposed to Jewish dominance, and who have been considered as second-class citizens in the state of Israel¹⁰³ (or, when taking the division between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, as third-class citizens). Due to the political and social marginalisation within the Israeli people, Palestinian intra-community solidarity has structured a deep entwined process of national consciousness, preserving and transmitting their historical, political and cultural identity. From this viewpoint, those classified as 1948 Palestinians, who have been identified in terms of being the main enemies of the Jewish state since its establishment, have needed to balance their status in-between Israeli Jews and Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

4.1. 1948 and 1967: Their Socio-Political Effects on Palestinian Women

Although Palestinian women in Israel should be formally considered as full citizens of the Jewish state, in reality their status has been classified through the operation of discriminations and restrictions, which have worsened their socio-economic, political, legal, and cultural conditions. In a parallel way, notions of security threat and militarisation have not only affected Israeli Jewish women, as has been illustrated in the previous paragraph, but have affected the powerless Palestinian women more severely¹⁰⁴. In fact, they have gone through difficult experiences as women that

¹⁰³ Palestinian citizens of the Jewish state amount to over one million, about twenty per cent of the Israeli population. There is a high level of separation between Jews and Palestinians (in particular in the institutional spheres), and inequalities continue to be evident mainly in occupational income, education and political power. With regard to exclusion and subordination of the so-called '1948 Palestinians', see the most significant works by Ian Lustick, Sammy Smooha, Nadim Rouhana.

¹⁰⁴ The insecure and difficult social status in which Palestinians have continued to live has served to accentuate the concept of family honour; community supervision over women has been accepted so as to reinforce their nationalist identity roots. Such a phenomenon has provoked a number of controversial debates within the Palestinian community in Israel.

have to prevent challenges to their own national identity and, at the same time, they have to stand up to dramatic social, political and economic injustices against their community.

After the destructions and losses of 1948, Palestinians became a minority entirely dependent on and under the control of the Jewish-dominated authority. Since Palestinian men had lost control over their land and jobs, they could only gain power over their wives and children in continuity with the centuries-old patriarchal system. On the one hand, Palestinian Israeli women were forced to live in a subordinate condition both under military restrictions and as a result of the powerlessness of Palestinian men, assuming responsibility for preservation of their own national narrative identity. On the other hand, they resisted the political and social consequences of the *Nakba*, establishing women's organisations aimed at improving women's conditions of work and education, such as the *Women's Renaissance Movement* in Nazareth (then also with its branches in Haifa and Acre) and the *Acre Arab Women's Association*, in addition to joint groups with progressive Jewish women such as the *Movement of Democratic Women* (Abdu, 2007).

Afterwards, the consequences of the 1967 war implicated a process of 're-Palestinianization'¹⁰⁵ that allowed women to participate actively in the Israeli labour market and educational system, by expressing their own identity in public demonstrations and political struggles in order to obtain full national and civil rights (Españoli in Mayer, 1994: 109-113). Along these principles, women organised numerous political actions within such organisations as *al-Ard (the Land)* and *Abna'a al-Balad*, setting up activists' groups to work in the socio-economic field as well as on political women's empowerment.

4.2. *Palestinian Women's Political Interactions since the First Intifadah*

At the end of 1980s, the outbreak of the first *Intifadah* intensified national solidarity between Palestinian women in Israel and Palestinian women from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Palestinian Israeli women increased their collective feminist

¹⁰⁵ It is correlated with the meaning of being Palestinian inside Israel and the question of which kind of relationships are to be shared with Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Both the national identity and the representation as minority group within the state of Israel have been the main components of their self-determination struggle since 1948.

awareness by focussing it in the direction of counteracting the internal hierarchical system that produced a national minority subjected to the militarised Israeli Jewish society. The creation of several committees supporting women's activism represented the initial step towards empowering them in a new political reality in which Palestinian women could express their civil identity as citizens of Israel together with their national identity as Palestinians. Despite the proliferation of women's networks, Palestinian women had to challenge their own internal male-dominated system and also to prevail against the Jewish Ashkenazi hegemony active within Israeli feminist organisations. In such a way, their dual struggle has remained a persistent paradigm in the rising process of Palestinian women's activism inside Israel.

In the following decade, the 1990s, along with a more resolute feminist approach, new Palestinian women's groups and committees were founded, among which are *Jafra - The Palestinian Feminist Movement in Israel*, *al-Fanar - The Palestinian Feminist Organization*, and *Women Against Violence*, groups calling into question the multiple dimensions of domination and abuse towards women. In relation to this perspective, use of violence against women has been closely associated with other forms of violence inflicted in the occupied Palestinian territories, as well as in the Israeli home front. Gendered and militaristic connections between 'men and women', 'Palestinians and Israeli Jews', 'occupied and occupier' have revealed daily demonstrations of rights' violation and repression (Sharoni in Fuchs, 2005: 231-244).

Multidimensional implications of political violence (referred prevalently to military occupation) and domestic violence have obliged women to confront oppression on two fronts, as members of their national community and as women in their private life. Although such a concept has been already discussed in the previous chapters, it is necessary to emphasise yet again the relationship between violence against the 'enemy' and violence against women, within a perspective of double gendered oppression. As the feminist theorist Cynthia Enloe has pointed out:

“military forces past and present have not been able to get, keep, and reproduce the sorts of soldiers they imagine they need without drawing on ideological beliefs concerning the different and stratified roles of women and men. [...] Ignore gender - and social construction of femininity and masculinity and the relations between them - and it becomes impossible adequately to explain how military forces have managed to capture and control so much of society's imagination and resources” (Enloe, 1988: 212).

Since the first *Intifadah*, Palestinian women in Israel have become linking partners between Palestinian women from the occupied territories and Israeli Jewish women, opening relationships and organising meetings also throughout the process which has been termed as ‘transversal politics’. By expressing their empathy and solidarity, Palestinian and Jewish Israeli women, together with Palestinian women mainly from the West Bank, have initiated significant joint demonstrations and projects, opposing the militaristic mainstream (which has also been initially represented within the Israeli peace movement)¹⁰⁶. As a result of such joint initiatives that will be critically studied in Part II of the thesis, Palestinian women citizens of Israel have to face their ambivalent double status, and this has often meant feeling marginalised both in the Israeli and Palestinian women’s arenas. In fact, while this process has reinforced self-representation of Palestinian women, at the same time it has accentuated the boundaries between Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians under military occupation, increasing divergences among the multifaceted expressions of the Palestinian national identity (Españoly in Mayer, 1994: 106-118).

4.3. *Palestinian Women’s Realities: Experiences from Fieldwork*

In the Palestinian territories of 1948, during my fieldwork¹⁰⁷, one of the main focuses was directed to the historic experience of *Isha L’Isha* based in Haifa, which includes differentiated women’s groups such as *Haifa Feminist Center*, *Kayan - Feminist Organization*, *Haifa Rape Crisis Center*, *Aswat - Palestinian Gay Women*. As being a Palestinian-Jewish coalition, *Isha L’isha* has achieved its main object in establishing a shared place where women from contrasting realities may work and live together, regardless of their ethno-national identities. Throughout such a paradigm,

¹⁰⁶ One of the main organisations within the Israeli peace movement, *Peace Now*, has underlined that the required way to solve the conflict needs military power based on nationalist security strategies. It is no coincidence that this group was founded by reserve officers and soldiers who decided to abandon combat units. In the beginning, they marginalised women, reproducing a strict gendered hierarchy (Helman, 2009).

¹⁰⁷ As I explained in the methodological paragraph, I decided to concentrate my study on three main geographical areas, Ramallah, Jerusalem and Haifa. I am aware that another challenging reality is represented by Palestinian Bedouins from the Naqab, where one of the most important women’s coalitions called *Ma’an - The Union of Arab Bedouin Women’s Organizations in the Naqab* was founded in Beersheba in 2000. They have proposed political and social activities in the South of Israel, by attempting to consolidate joint struggles based on the relationship between national identity and women’s issues.

women activists of the coalition have described their bi-national perspective as a unique example of equality and cooperation in Israel, believing firmly in true partnerships between Palestinians and Jews. Since all groups within the coalition are founded on a bi-national principle, each of them may represent every point of view, bringing innovative change from within the Israeli society.

Among them, *Kayan - Feminist Organization*, which was founded in 1998, has developed significant perceptions about women's roles and rights. Their activists have intensified women's participation in the political-social arena, and have adopted strategies of both personal and collective empowerment in private as well as public spheres. In particular, as a group of Arab feminists they have to deal with the most challenging issue related to their national narrative identity and its specific position in Israeli feminist politics. Since its foundation, *Kayan* has highlighted values of equality and freedom by promoting Palestinian women's socio-economic status and legal rights within their own community, before directing this approach further towards the Israeli Jewish society. In the role of director, Rula Deeb has defined herself:

“I am an activist in the social sense within the feminist movement. I am aware of my national claims, but I do not think that is something essential, I am not a nationalist woman, I do not emphasise it all the time. [...] However, in a parallel way, as long as the frame continues to be nationalism, I believe that feminism will never be able to deconstruct the context of this conflict”¹⁰⁸.

From her viewpoint (along with the basic standpoints of the organisation) the meaning of being Palestinian in Israel still represents the core of the internal debate among Israeli feminist activists as well as between Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians from the occupied territories. In fact, as Deeb has gone on to say:

“affirming ‘I am Palestinian’ is a political identity that actually is powerful when someone wants to deny your identity. I am aware of the Palestinian history, of our people, I am an outcome of this history. [...] If you ask me what is nationalism: it is an imagined entity in a way, it is defined because of the others. And I am aware of this game to define me as belonging to a group with less privilege, less rights, more discriminated. On the other hand, I do not need this in every context and in every space”¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Rula Deeb, Haifa, November 10, 2009.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

One of the expressions of the asymmetry of power-relations between Palestinian and Jewish women is manifested in the Ashkenazi Jewish hegemony over the ‘Others’, as weaker communities who live in subjugated conditions. Looking at the multiplicity of narrative identities within the Israeli feminist peace movement, Khulood Badawi, one of the founders of *Ta’ayush (Arab Jewish Partnership)*¹¹⁰, has affirmed:

“for me in the national struggle it is very difficult to find your feminism, or your feminist view. I was very active in feminist organizations. I found very challenging to be activist as Arab woman in the Israeli feminist movement because we do not have the same priorities. For us, as Palestinian women, our priority is the national liberation, while on the Israeli Jewish side they are more interested in women’s rights. I can understand, but we do share neither same feelings nor same fears”¹¹¹.

In this sense, different priorities from Palestinian and Jewish women inside the Israeli feminist movement have made the creation of a shared agenda problematic. Reporting another significant point of view about the meaning of feminism(s), Badawi has stressed:

“feminism is not only about gender, but a way of thinking, a principle that we can share also with men. I am not in favour with the definitions used by most feminist groups. I think that feminism should be something taken for granted by each person and should be a human right rather than a gender issue”¹¹².

Whereas the historic joint politics among Israeli Palestinian and Jewish women has created meaningful joint experiences on the one hand, on the other hand political as well as social gaps between the dominant side and the weaker one have continued to divide deeply women’s peace organisations. At the present time, it has been hard to find common ground and to reach common statements, even though this has remained the most important political challenge. Palestinian women in Israel, believing firmly in national and women’s rights issues, have been strong-minded enough to engage themselves in peace activities founded on mutual connection among identities,

¹¹⁰ Starting from its literal meaning, ‘living together’, *Ta’ayush* has been one of the main joint grassroots organisations founded after the upsurge of the second *Intifadah* in the fall of 2000. As stated in their founding declaration, they have jointly aimed at struggling physical and mental walls that have been constructed between Arabs and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians, who live on the same land. It has been considered as one of the most successful examples of Palestinian-Israeli joint groups (though it has represented a mixed organisation, not only composed of women). More details are available at <URL:<http://www.taayush.org>>

¹¹¹ Interview with Khulood Badawi, East Jerusalem, December 6, 2009.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

consciousness and struggles, and to prevent any further discrimination. As the feminist activist Nabila Espanioly has often emphasised in her writings:

“the Palestinian women in Israel are struggling for the self-determination of the Palestinian people as well as for equal rights for themselves as Israeli citizens. There is a connection between the two struggles. If Israeli Jewish women perceive the connection between Israeli Palestinian women’s struggles for peace and equality and their own efforts, the two circles will come closer together” (Espanioly in Swirski and Safir, 1991: 151).

5. Heterogeneous Narrative Identities within a Feminist Picture

In the militarised Israeli society, the gendered polarisation of power has expressed a prevalently male-dominated nationalist identity, strengthening not only the endemic conflict against Palestinians, but also increasing internal minority discriminations. As a consequence of the *status quo*, the conclusive part of this chapter will give emphasis to the fact that Israeli women activists do not represent a unitary subjectivity, but have multiple voices constructing and explaining their own reality, formed as the result of intersection among different identities.

5.1. Crossing Divisions: Mutual Connections and Actions

The variegated panorama of Israeli women activists has been divided into the so-called ‘system of the quarters’, which is made up of Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Palestinian and lesbian representatives. Each of them has proposed its own priorities, but, nevertheless, it has been necessary to share power in order to create a unified coalition able to represent a viable political alternative within Israeli society. The majority of the Israeli interviewees have stressed the importance of that specific turning point, due to the matter of representation concerning especially the most oppressed communities that have started to interlink perspectives and strategies within an alternative political process.

In reality, theoretical connections and political implications have not followed common struggles because of the primacy of white feminists in a non-white majority. As repeated by a few of Israeli activists I interviewed, listening to and talking with

‘Other’ women who have not been completely involved themselves in feminist practices might be the initial step required to give rise to feminist approaches, and to overcome the restriction imposed by thinking in terms of standardised boxes. In this way, not only theory, but also political activism would need to “deeply understand different parties of the society, by managing joint struggles. As feminists we know that we have to keep different identities together and fight together for same messages and tasks”¹¹³.

From a similar perspective, another leading Israeli feminist activist, Yvonne Deutsch, has argued about herself and, more in general, the Israeli Jewish feminist movement:

“I feel a lot of alienation from my own society. I am not identified with most of people of my society and this brings a lot of loneliness. I belong to what I call ‘resistant occupiers’: I am against the occupation, but I also acknowledge the fact that I am part of the occupation and that I have privileges because of the occupation. A place of conflict is not an easy place where to live, it is a place of choice in everyday life. I have also feelings of resentment and pain as a Jewish woman: how we become the oppressor, how we do not really see what is going on. We have not learnt. It is painful to see all this”¹¹⁴.

Although this assertion can only be taken as representing a minority perspective within the Israeli feminist movement, it has been able to group together the most challenging questions at the core of the current deadlock. Most of the women that I met have understood how complicated it is to attempt to claim fixed boundaries and pre-constituted categories with the intention of legitimising mutual bonds between personal and collective narratives.

Furthermore, in many cases, Israeli women’s organisations have also experienced the ‘NGOization’ and the professionalisation processes, as already discussed in relation to the Palestinian case (mainly mentioned in Islah Jad’s analysis). Specifically, dealing with gender issues and women’s rights has aimed at depoliticising women’s movements (Herzog, 2008: 276-277). In this way, it has meant that several women’s projects (depending mostly on external funding sources) have often been exposed to unbalanced strategic priorities between their political agenda and donors’ goals. For instance, many of these Israeli women’s NGOs have been funded by US

¹¹³ Interview with Anat Saragusti, Tel Aviv, December 14, 2009.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Yvonne Deutsch, Jerusalem, June 19, 2011.

Jewish women's groups, influencing both the feminist political agenda and women's scholarship, as well as exerting control over some Israeli-Palestinian joint projects.

Nonetheless, at least at the theoretical level, it has still been possible to create an effective discourse starting with multidimensional principles as bases of the feminist counter-culture. From this overview, one of the main feminist theorists, Hanna Herzog, has suggested the following stages:

“engaging in a critique of the dominant view and exposing mechanisms of cultural dominance; challenging binary thinking and politicization; redefining dominant categories; and challenging hierarchical perceptions of power and politics” (Herzog, 2006).

As a result, the expression of being feminist in Israel has required women to propose alternative ways of defining the dominant society in which women live their everyday struggles, and in which they also have to share experiences and values within their minority communities. In this sense, a deeper understanding of their different roles and strategies has become essential. In keeping in mind such a consideration and looking at the *status quo* of the persistent linkage between ethno-national identities and local kinships, Erella Shadmi has expressed:

“what we need is to recognise different collectives, and understand how we can think differently on the same issues. It is not only a sharing, but other major principles have to be used, non-violent attitudes and joint decisions: it is far from nationalism, in fact it would develop a different kind of inter-communal relationships among all the collectivities”¹¹⁵.

In relation to the Israeli internal asymmetry, the current societal order is defined as follows: Ashkenazi men, Ashkenazi women, Oriental men, Oriental women, Ethiopian men, Ethiopian women, Palestinian men, and Palestinian women. In accordance with this hierarchy, narrative identities have been established on mutual connections among struggling ethno-nationalisms. Such a politics has determined second-class women's narratives, in addition to oppressive discriminations against subordinate communities (Españoly in Swirski and Safir, 1991: 150). During the latest decade, within Israeli Jewish and Palestinian women's peace activities, problematic disputes have intensified, mainly because of the increase of prominence of both ethno-

¹¹⁵ Interview with Erella Shadmi, Haifa, September 14, 2010.

national identities as result of the oppressive stalemate of the ongoing military occupation. Despite feminist basic standpoints which advocate the adoption of non-hierarchical structures and egalitarian roles, the reality of what has occurred within many women's organisations has shown that achieving fair representation and, in particular, moving beyond the so-called 'politics of difference', is a troublesome process.

In this perspective, social justice and equality principles continue to represent the only way through which Israeli women's active participation could overcome the one-dimensional agenda promoted by the Ashkenazi leadership. In this direction, Palestinian and Mizrahi women especially can still establish mutual relationships and strong strategies to conduct from within joint struggles against political, cultural, and social inequality. Women's activism should mean open-minded and egalitarian politics to challenge everyday discriminations, and not to increase disparities among minorities. A shared perspective, suggested by both Mizrahi Jewish and Palestinian Israeli women, can possibly represent a third way to be followed.

5.2. Problematizing the Zionist Narrative

Within the militarised paradigm of masculinity, Israeli Jewish women's political experiences have dealt with interpreting the primary meaning of Zionism, which has been considered as the Jewish original ethno-nationalist expression, in spite of its heterogeneous forms and representations. Indeed, the majority of Ashkenazi feminists have encouraged the hegemonic Zionist discourse, deleting Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians from their historical narratives. At the same time, this has been the crux of the mainstream discourse that has equated the two nationalisms without situating Zionism as a settler-colonial project in Palestine. In fact, whilst in the context of Palestinian women's activism national claims have been interrelated to social issues, Zionist standpoints have created divergent opinions among women involved in Israeli peace organisations by underlining controversial individual as well as collective senses of belonging.

Undoubtedly, as already described throughout the chapter, women's identities have been continuously reconstructed in producing the Israeli Jewish national narrative together with reinforcing and perpetuating women's stereotypes in the patriarchal

system. Consequently, the Zionist military-masculine hegemony has produced gendered relations not only between male occupiers and female occupied, but also within the Israeli Jewish society itself that has silenced and stigmatised its women along with its internal ‘others’ (Lentin, 2000). As was mentioned in the previous paragraph, another critical discourse related to Zionism is based on the antagonism between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, associated with the Zionist original plan to provide a homeland for all Jews. This has determined a political strategy through which Mizrahi people have suffered not only from structural gaps created by the dominant Ashkenazi elite, but also from their incomplete integration into what was initially proclaimed as an egalitarian foundation of the Jewish state of Israel (Shohat in McClintock, Mufti, and Shohat, 1997: 39-44).

Since the beginning of the 1970s, such an internal debate has characterised disparate opinions and struggles within the Israeli women’s movement as well. During the ‘First World Conference on Women’ in Mexico City in 1975, the *Declaration on the Equality of Women* stated that women had to fight against colonialism, foreign occupation, Zionism, racial discrimination, and apartheid¹¹⁶. Concerning this contentious issue, on the one hand, one of the foremost Israeli Jewish feminists Gila Svirsky has declared:

“I call myself Zionist even though I am completely against the occupation, the expansion of Israeli settlements, the Wall, but I believe that Israel has the right to exist, has the right to define itself. My view of Zionism is about developing a better society in Israel, that should be not only Jewish, but a society with social justice and equality for everyone”¹¹⁷.

In addition, Svirsky has felt the need to stress a crucial difference among Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women with regard to their relationship between feminism and nationalism, affirming that:

“on the Palestinian side, there is not contradiction between nationalism and feminism, on the Israeli Jewish side we believe that there is a contradiction. I think that there is a kind of soft nationalism, which is about feeling good towards your nation and I am comfortable with it. I am not comfortable with the

¹¹⁶ A few months later, on 10 November 1975, UN Resolution 3379 identified Zionism as “a form of racism and racial discrimination”; however, this Resolution was revoked on 16 December 1991.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Gila Svirsky, Jerusalem, December 8, 2009.

hard nationalism, which is feeling your nation is better, more important than another one”¹¹⁸.

On the contrary, in opposition to such a perspective, other Israeli Jewish feminists have explained their scepticism about Zionist/non-Zionist self-definitions. For instance, Anat Saragusti, executive director of AGENDA¹¹⁹, has remembered that:

“it is a way to define your identity. If you are a Zionist you belong to the mainstream, if you are not a Zionist you can be anti-Zionist or not Zionist. There was a time I defined myself as a not-Zionist because I said Zionism is a sort of imperialism, but now its aim is finished, the state of Israel was established and you do not need Zionism anymore; nowadays maybe you need some contents on the concept of ‘Israeliness’. [...] I do not deal with it anymore because it is not relevant for my identity, we have other questions more central on our agenda”¹²⁰.

Further significant viewpoints have problematised the question, for example that of Judy Blanc, one of the earliest Israeli feminists who started to get in touch with Palestinian women at the end of 1960s. Nowadays, she has perceived the current situation as:

“a moment in which Israel is becoming much more fascist, the new definition as Israel ‘the state of the Jews’ that Netanyahu is trying to impose represents an extreme statement and is not more based on the state of Israel. This is why I declare myself as Israeli, and not Jew (even I am Jew), but I want that the state of Israel can be the state of all citizens”¹²¹.

Furthermore, from an additional critical framework, the prominent feminist scholar Ronit Lentin has proclaimed herself to be an anti-Zionist, by showing how the Israeli military occupation, founded on the Zionist ideology along with its conventional national security strategy, has legitimised gendered discrimination and violence (Lentin in Abdo and Lentin, 2002: 295-315). Nevertheless, with regard to the Zionist internal debate, the number of non-Zionist and anti-Zionist people is still minor and not yet very significant in terms of influence on Israeli public opinion.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ It is a no-profit organisation, having the aim of reframing socio-political changes within the Israeli public debate and media. More details are available at <URL:<http://agenda.org.il/english>>

¹²⁰ Interview with Anat Saragusti, Tel Aviv, December 14, 2009.

¹²¹ Interview with Judy Blanc, Jerusalem, October 27, 2009.

5.3. *The Way Forward and Upcoming Feminist Expressions*

In spite of the current political deadlock, by means of acts of resistance to patriarchy and militarism, a number of Israeli women's peace organisations have assumed the necessity of refusing to consider the 'Other' as taking the exclusive role of the enemy. Their most celebrated slogans have proved political involvement against their governments' strategies concerning war crimes and violations of Palestinians' rights. Most of the women's experiences that I have tried to bring out throughout my analysis have represented alternative ways of looking at their own society and of understanding different viewpoints. As the director of *Al-Tafula Center (For the Child)* in Nazareth¹²², Nabila Espanioly, has underlined, observing that there is no contradiction between feminist and ethno-nationalist narratives:

“for me feminism is my life, my political perspective, my activism, my understanding of the reality, it is the ideology through which I interpret things around me. It is my reading of the conflict, of different identities of people, also during their constructions and de-constructions. [...] Feminism is not only a tool. You should see feminism as action, as a way of understanding my national identity as well as my citizenship identity. It is integrated in-between: my understanding of nationalism is embodied in my feminist perspective. [...] Unfortunately one of the main problems is what I call 'hierarchy of suffering', as hierarchy of legitimization to paralyze political activism, especially the feminist one”¹²³.

Calling for what has been defined as 'third wave feminism'¹²⁴, several women have stressed their commitment to the creation of a new Israeli feminist agenda. As a result, they have become aware of the necessity to respect differences through egalitarian standpoints, rather than hiding them. On such a subject, Rula Deeb has questioned that:

¹²² In addition to women's issues, this centre deals with problematic questions concerning children, in particular with promoting an educational agenda open towards new models of teaching and learning among non-violent cultures.

¹²³ Interview with Nabila Espanioly, Nazareth, September 15, 2010.

¹²⁴ In response to the partial and controversial debates that have been produced by the 'second-wave feminism' in the 1970s, since the early 1990s a post-structuralist interpretation of gendered relations and feminist approaches has started to propose alternative politics. The term was initially used by Rebecca Walker in 1995 writing an article in which she encouraged young women to join their mothers' activism, but at the same time to embrace new forms of feminism. Into a more trans-national perspective, it has been mainly known for taking into account different kinds of discrimination that include race, sexual orientation and class, in addition to women's oppression.

“if we, in terms of Israeli feminists and Arab women, realise power of feminism as the main context that we play in and through it we may actually deal with nationalism, it will be much more effective in order to achieve hopeful goals for our people. Unfortunately it is not the current situation because nationalism is limiting and constraining each of us”¹²⁵.

In fact, whether women have assumed critical views in relation to their ethno-national backgrounds or not, it is also true that Israeli feminist expressions have not been able to link their resistance towards the current political context based on power inequalities inside the state of Israel with their struggles against the military occupation of Palestinian people.

Following this internal critique, Yvonne Deutsch has strongly contested that:

“as women’s movement we have not reached it at all. I think that we live ‘black and white’, it is easier, but this will not resolve the problem. We have problems among ourselves. It is not easy for us to accept the changes within our political differences, for instance regarding the debate ‘one-two state solution’, or among Zionist and non-Zionist women. We have to learn to respect anti-occupation diverse perspectives; there are women who are thinking differently from me, women who have nationalist feelings that I do not. How may we accept differences among us? It is so difficult for each of us to deconstruct the nationalist paradigm. For us it is more difficult to accept Israeli Jewish women’s nationalism than Palestinian women’s nationalism, because we feel that it reflects us. I know that we are more critical towards ourselves because this is our responsibility”¹²⁶.

Such a belief, which still represents a minority among the Israeli feminist activists, has stood for the essential recognition of the asymmetry between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women, stressing the sense of responsibility from the Israeli side towards the Palestinian women who continue to live under military occupation. The fact of being part of the occupier society has been underlined by the majority of the Israeli Jewish interviewees, even though only a marginal number of them have been aware of their privileged status. In this sense, a deeper analysis of diverse narrative identities within Israeli feminist political activism might suggest the next step to be followed within academia and on the ground as well.

The problems described in the paragraphs above are the main reasons why the emergence of a joint cohesive women’s movement within Israel has not taken place, and instead a number of women’s organisations have gone through their own individual

¹²⁵ Interview with Rula Deeb, Haifa, November 10, 2009.

¹²⁶ Interview with Yvonne Deutsch, Jerusalem, June 19, 2011.

parallel initiatives and struggles. The scholar Ella Shohat, during a joint meeting between Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians held in Toledo in 1989, already attempted to encourage progress:

“we insisted that a comprehensive peace would mean more than merely settling political border. It will require the erasure of the East/West cultural borders between Israel and Palestine, and thus the remapping of national and ethnic-racial identities against the deep scars of colonizing partitions” (Shohat, 1997:18).

The current clashing picture concerning the heterogeneity of women’s feminist perspectives within the Israeli peace movement has made evident the need to struggle on common issues by trying to understand connections and, at the same time, differences between numerous narrative identities. In this way, women’s role in moving forward recognition and reconciliation could be translated into people’s everyday life, starting with the increase of solidarity inside feminist activism itself.

PART II

RECOGNITION AND RECONCILIATION WITHIN WOMEN'S ACTIVISM: A CRITICAL PICTURE

With the purpose of deconstructing conventional approaches towards feasible peaceful options for the future of the land of Palestine/Israel, the leitmotiv of the whole dissertation is based on women's political activism, along with the increase of challenges to ethno-national narrative identities within a context of military occupation. In particular, the following section will attempt to question the foremost historical and current standpoints from which women activists have obtained a contribution for their joint discourses and practices. Although the mainstream literature (and, in several cases, also the feminist literature) has identified more and more boundaries among contrasting ethno-national communities who live in Palestine/Israel, my aim will be to provide alternative pathways both at the theoretical level and as practical activities on the ground, through which it has been feasible to understand the original meaning of 'inextricability' among Arabs and Jews, Palestinians and Israelis. In other words, much like Edward Said's belief in the closeness of Arab-Jewish historic interrelations, the central theme that will run through the next chapters has emerged from some problematic interactions and perspectives emerging within women's movements, both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, and also from within joint initiatives.

The implication of the historical and political consequences generated by the Israeli military occupation can be considered as the core issue when critically exploring the complexity of recognition and reconciliation paradigms within such a settled conflict. Palestinian and Israeli Jewish histories have constituted mutually exclusive as well as closely interconnected narratives in which each side has provided comprehensive explanations and justifications for collective group actions, including violence towards the so-called 'Other'. In the course of more than sixty years of exploitation and conflict, the rise of ethno-national identities has played a central role in shaping a collective sense of 'Self' within both Palestinian nationalism and the Zionist foundation of the state of Israel. In particular, in terms of the *War of Independence* for

Israeli Jews and the *Nakba* (the ‘Catastrophe’) for Palestinians, what happened in 1948 has constituted the watershed between past and future events, individual and collective experiences.

In this context, the exclusion of the other side, along with a focus on the participants’ own background and rights, has fostered the assumption of narrative identities which emerge from the collective memories of an entire people, even reflecting the unfair asymmetries among the variety of actors involved. This has also influenced the reality of the major women’s joint initiatives developed since the 1990s, despite women’s and feminist political mobilisation directed towards the increase of ethno-national narrative identities, which have initially tackled the hegemonic mainstream both inside Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories.

In chapter five, going more deeply into the most crucial theoretical standpoints of the current debate concerning viable political pathways of conflict resolution between Palestinians and Israeli Jews, the focus will be on both historic and current alternative Palestinian-Israeli joint examples, and in particular on the role of women and their political involvement that can be considered as the earliest stage in the movement towards the initiation of the women’s joint initiatives arising in the 1990s. By briefly taking account of the most well-known ‘bottom-up’ reconciliation strategies used by women activists in Northern Ireland and South Africa¹²⁷, I have attempted to discuss the present deadlock afflicting the majority of the Palestinian-Israeli joint projects, that seem to be entrapped into an ongoing decline. In particular, the analysis will take into consideration the most internationally recognised women’s joint coalition, the *Jerusalem Link*, by examining the content of the interviews I conducted as well as the primary sources collected during my fieldwork.

Additional alternative approaches are discussed in chapter six, which will focus on what has emerged in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel from political proposals espoused by or initiated within the women’s movements, and the degree of progress made by these movements in overcoming ethno-national narrative identities, though in a reality of military occupation. By considering the role of women activists in deconstructing their individual and collective interconnection with the increasing

¹²⁷ The choice of comparing Northern Ireland and South African women’s joint groups as examples of ‘bottom-up’ understanding and reconciliation is linked to the central aim of the research: the critical analysis of women’s activism (also within joint initiatives) both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel during the last decade. Such women’s experiences have questioned the challenging realities of conflict, occupation and the increase of ethno-national narrative identities.

political weight undertaken by their own ethno-national identities, the study will analyse the relevant content of the semi-structured interviews I conducted in the field, with the purpose of examining whether and in which way women have promoted the building or rebuilding of shared narratives. In particular, such a discourse will seek to centre on women's reactions towards the debate related to the overcoming of both nationalisms within the reality of Palestine/Israel, and the prospects for embedding this into the deep heterogeneity existing among their communities.

Through a constant dialogue between the theoretical perspectives suggested by women activists and their effectiveness in the everyday struggle, chapter seven, the last chapter of the dissertation, will question the feasibility of women's feminist critique as a future paradigm worthy of inclusion in the complex mix of approaches directed towards Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution. In particular, although such a debate has been often considered to be merely an intellectual exercise, I will focus on a few instances of women's initiatives that have practically demonstrated their purpose in challenging both military occupation and hegemonic ethno-national narratives. From consideration of these experiences, including theoretical as well as practical concepts founded on civil disobedience and non-violent resistance, I hope to highlight some of the most significant examples of women's joint political struggle. At the same time, whilst recognising the many difficulties inside Israeli and Palestinian women's initiatives, I intend to evidence that the political prospect provided by women's counter-narratives has brought to light critical arguments and practices of resistance which show that women are able to act in response to an environment fostered by ethno-national supremacy.

CHAPTER FIVE

PARALLELISM AND INEXTRICABILITY AMONG WOMEN'S JOINT INITIATIVES

1. Reconciliation among Opposite Narratives: from Theory to Reality

In conflict and post-conflict backgrounds, the challenging paradigm founded on recognition and reconciliation has reflected the complexity of covering a varied range of social, political, religious and cultural issues. A working definition may be delineated as a step-by-step cognitive and emotional process that has been often connected with the necessity of reconstructing fractured dialogues within former conflict relationships¹²⁸ (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004; Rothfield, Fleming, Komesaroff, 2008). Nevertheless, the gap between theoretical statements and practical effects has shown the ambiguity of such political procedures that, on the contrary, may just result in volatile discourses, since they have not been able to fulfil the requested expectations.

1.1. Steps towards Reconciliation: Some Controversial Issues

Within this framework, a number of scholars have illustrated spontaneous 'bottom-up' developments, whereas other thinkers have proposed more planned socio-political 'top-down' strategies. In most cases, formal conflict resolutions have involved only institutional leaders in peace agreements, and very few components from the civil society: similar resolutions have been usually unstable because of the lack of people's participation in recognition and reconciliation processes; in the majority of cases, it has been more effective when 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' proceed simultaneously¹²⁹.

By taking into consideration the perpetrators-victims dichotomy in the specificity of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, its rhetorical meaning has been structured with regard to concepts of dominance and submission. Such a view has required the

¹²⁸ The issue regarding different forms of dialogue among conflicting sides will be critically taken into account in this chapter, focussing on joint initiatives between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women.

¹²⁹ For background on this topic, see the collective volumes such as Bar-Siman-Tov (2004) and Rothfield, Fleming and Komesaroff (2008).

examination of two opposite paradigms: the one that has been described in terms of the ‘paradigm of parity’, also called the ‘paradigm of balance’, referring to a long-term pattern used by Israeli Jews, and, the other one, the ‘paradigm of oppressor-oppressed’, that should be applied in order to examine from within the question of responsibility (Pappé, 2005). As a consequent step, it has become necessary to understand which features may assure the achievement of fair recognition and reconciliation and in which way they may be interrelated with the persistence of military occupation and, thus, with strict ethno-nationalist boundaries.

In the light of the current deep-seated impasse within the Israeli-Palestinian ‘peace process’, the reconciliation process has appeared vague without practical evidence of progress, and furthermore it has frequently generated negative reactions from grassroots movements due to this lack of concrete results, above all the end of military occupation on the Palestinian side. In particular, common use of the term ‘coexistence’, connected with its theoretical origins and practical implications determined by political leaderships, has frequently hidden the reality of violent struggles and discriminatory aftermaths. The literal meaning of coexistence, that is ‘living together’, represents only the primary stage of an extensive discourse directed to overcome the endless imbalanced asymmetry created within the Israeli-Palestinian context. Such an expression has also implied a controversial debate between the theoretical level and everyday reality: it is not enough to reach equality in concrete terms. In this frame, Michal Zak, an Israeli Jewish political activist and one of the founders of the *School for Peace* of the Palestinian-Jewish village of *Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom*, has expressed her perplexity about the significance of coexistence stating that:

“I have not used it for a long time for two reasons: this word is becoming meaningless; it does not say anything, what kind of coexistence? But also because it becomes a word to describe this ‘peace industry’, I do not want to be associated with it. I think that many other words are becoming like this, for instance ‘peace education’, it has become not enough”¹³⁰.

In a comprehensive way, Zak has sought to underline the women’s role within the community, saying that:

¹³⁰ Interview with Michal Zak, Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, Doar Na Shimshon, November 23, 2009.

“I do not think that women have a different agenda, but they have a different way of conducting dialogue. Even though I do not know if this discourse really exists, I believe in women’s critical view towards the conflict both inside Israel and with the Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip”¹³¹.

1.2. Other Histories of Reconciliation: Northern Ireland and South Africa

Pursuing such a viewpoint, the next focal analysis will move towards two historic case-studies that include South Africa as a ‘paradigm of oppressor-victim’ and Northern Ireland in terms of a ‘paradigm of parity’. Palestine/Israel, Northern Ireland, and South Africa, albeit within different historical, geographical, economic, socio-political, cultural, and religious circumstances, are connected by common elements of governance such as occupation, colonization and dispossession¹³². I will consider mainly the role of women activists embedded in the construction of ethno-national narratives as well as in joint politics directed against clashing identities, with the aim of relating those experiences to the current deadlock of Israeli-Palestinian women’s joint political actions.

Since the 1990s, many academics and political activists have compared the three conflict situations, stressing analogies in the light of recent agreements and partial resolutions. Among them, the scholar Thomas Mitchell has argued in his study (2000) that the three realities have been commonly characterised by conflicts between settler and native populations¹³³. Therefore, the question of land has become the central aim of their struggles: in each related-context, settlers have usually dispossessed natives’ land through illegal means, and, consequently, indigenous people have preserved a small number of territories of insufficient quality, losing every economic or political control.

In studies which have not just made comparisons, but also attempted to reach a full understanding of the differences encountered in the three settings, nationalist dimensions have been examined from within distinctive frameworks that have included religious, racial, and ethnic issues (Connor, 1990). In general, the conflict in Northern

¹³¹ Interview with Michal Zak, Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, Doar Na Shimshon, November 23, 2009.

¹³² In particular, the comparison between the black population under the apartheid system in South Africa and the Palestinians under the Israeli military occupation has been considered by political activists and academics who support a single, democratic and secular state in Palestine/Israel as the fundamental starting point from which reconsidering the availability of a unique state between Palestinians and Israeli Jews might become possible.

¹³³ See the first chapter in relation to the issue of settler colonialism.

Ireland has been mainly considered as a religious struggle between Protestants and Catholics, whilst that of South Africa has been seen in terms of racial discrimination between Blacks and Whites, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as ethno-national clashes between Palestinian Arabs and Jews. Following the distinction that has been previously suggested concerning the ‘paradigm of parity’ and the ‘paradigm of oppressor-oppressed’, the Northern Ireland reconciliation process has been more centred on the former definition, while the South Africa post-apartheid era has been set up on the ‘perpetrator-victim’ concept. As a next logical step, the current analysis will briefly explore the foremost women’s ‘bottom-up’ joint initiatives both in North Ireland and in South Africa, as examples of women’s joint political activism challenged by deeply rooted ethno-national narratives and power asymmetries.

Within the background of the Irish Trouble, two of the most prominent women’s joint organisations may be considered as well-known examples of reconciliation practices: the *Women’s Support Network* that was established in 1985 by a group of women outside political affiliations, and the *Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition* that was founded in 1996 and led by one woman from the Catholic environment and another from the Protestant side (Cockburn, 1998: 76-98; Porter in Wilford and Miller, 1998: 54). Women’s networks between Unionists and Nationalists have begun cross-community cooperation in order to go beyond the spectrum of each national identity. In a joint perspective, several projects led by women from Catholic, Protestant and mixed backgrounds, involving a variety of relationships with religious and national communities, have attempted to dismantle sectarian ways of thinking in favour of cross-communal exchanges.

Irish women’s peace activism has been defined as a paradigmatic experience of successful transition from conflict to post-conflict reality, by underlining women’s potential in their political involvement. The Northern Ireland example, founded mainly on the so-called practice of ‘transversal politics’¹³⁴, has pointed to the construction of reflective processes of dialogue in order to bring nationalist boundaries into question, and, in parallel, to the process of contextualising historical, socio-political and religious differences. From this point of view, reproblematising the ‘intersectionality of

¹³⁴ With the aim of establishing interrelations and dialogue among societies in conflict, the term has been mainly used to describe joint initiatives between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women, who have attempted to go beyond ethno-national struggles through a democratic and participative process. For a comprehensive definition read Nira Yuval-Davis’s essay entitled *What is ‘Transversal Politics’?* (1999). It will be discussed in depth later in this chapter.

belongings' has been the political key to discovery of a common denominator able to open cross-community realities through daily politics based upon equity and inclusivity (Porter in Wilford and Miller, 1998: 54-55).

Moreover, the asymmetric nature of the Northern Ireland conflict has been considered to be one of the main similarities with the Palestinian/Israeli context by the feminist scholar Simona Sharoni. In fact, she has explained how Palestinians and Nationalists/Republicans stand for the weakest sides in which women have a strong involvement between the national liberation struggle and gender rights equality, while Israeli Jews and Unionists express a settler-colonial ideology towards which women have to symbolise the perpetuation of their nationalist projects (Sharoni, 1997). On the contrary, joint narratives have allowed women to argue about conventional concepts of womanhood and femininity with the purpose of redefining proper roles in their respective national movements (Sharoni in Moser and Clark, 2001: 85-98).

Moving towards the South Africa Apartheid context, it was back in 1936 that of the earliest women's organisations, the *Association of European and African Women*, started to promote cooperation between white and black women. However, such a project was based more on paternalistic statements rather than on real equality between the two sides. Later on, another significant women's joint group called *Black Sash*¹³⁵ was founded by Jean Sinclair in 1955, and supported the political request of highlighting some of the tragic consequences provoked by the repressive apartheid regime. Even though the majority of women members were white and only few blacks participated in it, they challenged the apartheid structure openly, by making use of numerous tools ranging symbolic demonstrations in public spaces to providing legal assistance in opposition to black women's daily experience of discriminations. In particular, they had a crucial role in offering assistance to rural black women and organising them into the *Rural Women's Movement* (Meintjes in Wilford and Miller, 1998: 68-69).

Also in South Africa, during the 1980s women activists started to be more and more involved within political struggles against male-dominated systems: the development of a feminist consciousness was promoted by building up a new collective memory and by sharing trauma produced during the apartheid regime. Within the African National Congress as well, the Women's Section supported a challenging

¹³⁵ It has been one of the main women's movements that inspired *Women in Black's* politics and practices.

campaign against apartheid oppression and gender discriminations to achieve a real national liberation (Meintjes in Wilford and Miller, 1998: 62-64). Two years before the end of the racial segregationist regime through multi-racial democratic elections and following the remarkable success of Nelson Mandela in 1994, the *Women's National Coalition* publicly accused the state of maintaining a linkage between women's oppression and national political strategies. As a result, the *Women's Charter* stressed egalitarian positions among all women, from upper and middle to working-class, Blacks and Whites, Muslims and Christians, whilst being aware of their internal differences¹³⁶.

Since the time when black South African women (likewise Palestinian women) recognised the interconnection between their double oppression by the patriarchal system and the external white domination, they began to focus on improving their conditions in everyday homeland life (Dajani in Mayer, 1994: 52-54). By bridging past cleavages without forgetting historic discriminatory policies, South African women's practices have sought to promote a common understanding of conflicting narrative identities.

Throughout this brief but crucial digression, my aim has been to suggest some alternative types of women's political involvement directed towards the Israeli-Palestinian context. Although I am aware of the complexity in evaluating rather different processes of reconciliation, this sub-paragraph has allowed me to move on with critical analysis regarding Israeli-Palestinian women's joint initiatives that have initially attempted to maintain expressions of recognition and reconciliation working against the foremost obstacle to a common future between the two sides, that is the Israeli military occupation.

2. Current Status of Palestinian-Israeli Joint Initiatives: Meanings and Obstacles

In the period between the so-called Oslo 'peace building' process in 1993 and the re-emergence of violent fighting in late September 2000 with the upsurge of the *al-Aqsa Intifadah*, several joint initiatives emerged from the Palestinian-Israeli political background with the aim of challenging the *status quo* of military occupation. Also

¹³⁶ The second and final draft of the Charter approved by the National Conference in February 1994 is available at <URL:<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/policy/womchart.htm>>

defined as ‘People-to-People’¹³⁷ projects, Palestinian-Israeli shared initiatives have claimed alternative politics as a means to end the conflict and move towards a sustainable and peaceful resolution. During the first stages of their involvement (or, at least, in their initial statements), a great number of participants in joint meetings, extending from youth to academics, from professional to humanitarian organisations, have declared the intention of transforming mutual attitudes and stereotypic perceptions concerning the other side, in order to prevent the worsening of violence in the everyday life of both societies.

2.1. Coalitions and Networks of Joint Politics

In the beginning of 1990s, the earliest joint initiatives (men and women, as well as women only) were developed. These included *PRIME* (*Peace Research Institute in the Middle East*), *IPCRI* (*Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information*), *MECA* (*Middle East Children Association*), and *Crossing Border*: the majority of them had to overcome the tough challenge of maintaining a joint agenda so as to observe equality and symmetry between Palestinians and Israeli Jews (Maoz, 2004: 567-571). In relation to a logic of mutual recognition, ‘People-to-People’ activities sought to pursue different strategies and practices, which were mainly directed towards joint politics for the promotion of peace, professional cooperation, and actions based on dialogue as a necessary step in the peace and reconciliation process (Herzog and Hai, 2005/6: 14-15).

In the last decade, non-violent joint forms of activism have continued to take place in diverse ways (from more informal structures to official coalitions), such as *Physicians for Human Rights (PHR)*¹³⁸ in association with several Palestinian organisations, *Combatants for Peace*¹³⁹, *Palestinian and Israeli Coalition Against*

¹³⁷ For the first time, the term was used in Article 8 of Annex VI of the *Interim Agreement* (also called *Oslo II* in September 1995), under Norwegian sponsorship, with the participation of the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, and the support of the international community. See the Annex VI named *Protocol Concerning Israeli-Palestinian Cooperation Programs* of the *Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip*.

¹³⁸ As reported in their statement of principles, it is “an independent organization that uses the integrity of medicine and science to stop mass atrocities and severe human rights violations against individuals”. More details are available at <URL:<http://physiciansforhumanrights.org>>

¹³⁹ This is one of the most remarkable non-violent joint groups, established by former Israeli and Palestinian combatants who have renounced the use of violence in the direction of ending the military occupation. Their primary goal is to make dialogue possible towards the ‘Other’, commonly considered only as the opposite side of the conflict, the enemy. By abandoning violence, they have initially tried to

House Demolition (including of ICAHD, and the *Jerusalem Centre for Social and Economic Rights*). In particular, the most prominent Israeli activist groups have been *Anarchists Against the Wall*¹⁴⁰ and *Ta'ayush*¹⁴¹, in cooperation with the *Palestinian Popular Committees* against the Wall and the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements established inside the West Bank¹⁴².

In line with similar joint initiatives the *Jerusalem Link*, founded by the *Jerusalem Center for Women (JCW)* - the Palestinian non-governmental women's centre based in Beit Hanina (East Jerusalem), and *Bat Shalom* (the *Jerusalem Women's Action Center*) - an Israeli Jewish women's feminist organisation, has been considered to be one of the major outcomes of the Oslo Accord and also to provide one of the most discouraging pictures of its demise. In being a women's initiative established on the political process of shared dialogue between opposite clashing narratives, the *Jerusalem Link's* original ideal has been the result of joint works by two independent women's organisations from East and West Jerusalem. As will be discussed in depth throughout the chapter, and in relation to the central research subject, such a joint Palestinian-Israeli women's experience has produced controversial consequences for what has been conventionally labelled as 'peace dialogue'. In these terms, a critical perspective requires exploration of unequal power-relations and discriminations which also occur within joint activities, and have constituted a source of difficulty which peaked after the second *Intifadah* and, later on, during the *Operation Cast Lead* in 2008/9.

explore alternative perspectives in joint meetings and mutual understanding, and later on they have started to inform their own people about the main reasons of their political choice. Their website is available at <URL:<http://cfpeace.org>>

¹⁴⁰ Since 2003 the group has played a crucial role in non-violent resistance against the Israeli military occupation. As they have strongly declared in their website: "it is the duty of Israeli citizens to resist immoral policies and actions carried out in our name. We believe that it is possible to do more than demonstrate inside Israel or participate in humanitarian relief actions. Israeli apartheid and occupation isn't going to end by itself - it will end when it becomes ungovernable and unmanageable. It is time to physically oppose the bulldozers, the army and the occupation". For more details see <URL:<http://www.awalls.org/>>

¹⁴¹ See note 110 in chapter four.

¹⁴² One of the most recent researches regarding non-violent resistance to the Israeli military occupation that have included Palestinian-Israeli joint initiatives has been conducted by Maxime Kaufman-Lacusta in *Refusing to Be Enemies: Palestinian and Israeli Nonviolent Resistance to the Israeli Occupation* (2010). Direct cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish activists needs to be analysed by way of a complete awareness concerning the different degrees of working together and the internal dynamics of effective shared actions. Consideration of such problematic issues with regard to non-violent resistance and civil disobedience practices will be given in chapter seven, dealing with some current examples in which women activists have obtained a significant key role.

2.2. Political, Physical, and Psychological Barriers in Joint Initiatives

By elaborating the predominant attitudes that have affected mutual perceptions of the other side, it is fundamental to recognise the different roles implemented by individuals and collectivities. On the one hand, active Israeli participation in joint projects has impressed the Palestinian partner, but, on the other hand, a number of misunderstandings and political mistakes have created further cleavages. Along these lines, the building up of relationships based on mutual trust has become a crucial step in the process of increasing Israeli awareness concerning the military occupation and its consequences for everyday Palestinian life. The need to readdress deep-rooted identity issues, including prejudice, fear and delegitimation of the 'Other', has represented a constructive component of recognition in all levels of both societies, as historic joint initiatives have demonstrated.

Shared processes have pointed towards applying transformational and transactional political tools in order not only to achieve a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but especially to eliminate asymmetrical relationships starting with a 'bottom-up' strategy (Herzog and Hai, 2005/6: 9-10). Although preliminary approaches followed by a number of 'People-to-People' projects have striven to manage joint works through mutual knowledge, empathy, and cooperation, with the intention of supporting individual as well as collective reconciliation (Pundak, 2005/6: 35), the reality on the ground has taken another direction.

In the meantime, Israeli policy has followed a strict unilateral plan culminating in the construction of a concrete wall along and within the West Bank (named either the 'Security Fence' or the 'Separation Wall'). Overseen by Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, the disengagement from the Gaza Strip can be seen as contributing to the accomplishment of Zionist political imperatives in terms of maximising the number of Jews by occupying land from which Palestinians are excluded, or at least by minimising the number of Palestinians present, and by promoting a constant increase in the size and number of illegal Israeli colonial settlements inside the Palestinian territories. By looking at the 'facts on the ground', the implementation of the internationally well-known solution 'two-state for two peoples' (relating to the establishment of a Palestinian state over all the Palestinian land occupied by Israel since 1967) has become

less feasible, and instead a gathering of ‘Bantustans’¹⁴³ is being created within historic Palestine.

On the other hand, the Palestinian National Authority has failed to provide self-government functions under pressure of local and international restrictions, losing its relevance as a counterpart to the unilateral Israeli move. In light of the recent impasse created by the demise of the Oslo process, the remote possibility of establishing an independent Palestinian state has become less viable, creating progressively internal political fragmentation, instability, and a sense of wider disillusionment, with effects extending beyond the geographical divisions (Hilal, 2007; Lentin, 2008; Tilley, 2005). As a result of what has been just mentioned, in the post-Oslo era the increase of physical barriers between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, specifically the impossibility of travelling freely, and the growth of political-psychological tensions, mainly due to the lack of trust towards the ‘Other’, have influenced such joint politics on the ground negatively. In particular, Palestinian participants have encountered major problems in obtaining permits in order to attend meetings inside Israel, creating further tensions and discussions about political-structural impediments to planning joint peace initiatives.

The persistence of the illegal military occupation has been one of the main causes of the failure to recognise equality as a basic principle within joint initiatives. Behind this façade, asymmetrical positions have been predominant by means of linking the Palestinians to dependent relationships with the Israeli partners. Furthermore, from a financial point of view, the extensive spread of ‘People-to-People’ projects has created joint ventures which have often been conditioned only by international funding, rather than joint peace proposals. Several cases have revealed the predominance of the Israeli partnership, which has received the greater part of economic aid from international donors, violating the primary conditions of joint initiatives and producing controversial changes in the attitude of the Palestinian subjugated counterparts, who have been frequently silent.

In contrast to the original objectives of establishing “dialogue and co-operation on the bases of equality, fairness and reciprocity” (*People-to-People Programme*, 1996,

¹⁴³ Palestinian enclaves have been compared to the ‘Bantustanisation’ process developed by the apartheid regime in South Africa with the objective of segregating the indigenous population in excluded spaces. In addition to this analysis, another description named ‘ghettoization’ has been proposed: from such a perspective, physical and symbolic fragmentations of the territory have determined new socio-spatial relations as instruments of exclusion and discrimination between dominant and subordinate societies (Korn in Lentin, 2008: 116-129).

in Knox and Quirk, 2000: 138), the current evidence has shown how such examples have neither improved structural and political issues nor encouraged joint peace politics. The risk of building up a potential ‘peace industry’ has been highlighted by many Palestinian, Israeli Jewish and international intellectuals. Among them, the academic Salim Tamari has underlined the way through which these projects, also labelled with the anecdotal expression of ‘Kissing Cousins’, have undermined the integrity of research activities as well as political initiatives that have ceased to assume critical perspectives concerning the real unfairness of the situation of the oppressed status of the native people (Tamari, 2005/6: 16-18).

2.3. *Normalising Occupation Policy and Occupied Lives*

Within such a framework, the concept of ‘normalisation’¹⁴⁴, that has been extensively discussed in academia as well as by grassroots movements, has created “a false image of ‘normal’ relations as if there is no occupier and occupied and as if the two sides are somehow equal” (Salem in Salam, 2007). In particular, the Palestinian internal debate is divided among those who have decided to continue their joint projects with Israeli Jews, others who have chosen to deal with Israeli Jews only after the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and those who have preferred to freeze any joint project since the uprising of *al-Aqsa Intifadah* (Kaufman-Lacusta, 2010: 153-155).

One of the main consequences of the weakening of joint struggles against the Israeli military occupation has been the introduction of additional internal arguments inside the Palestinian organisations as well as within the Israeli peace movement. In many joint examples, unbalanced political-structural patterns have reproduced the dominant framework of ‘occupier/occupied’. As the feminist activist Haggith Gor has explained:

“about all the joint projects that failed, I think that the Palestinians do not want this kind of cooperation because there is always the question of cooperating

¹⁴⁴ Even though the term has been used in common language following the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979, during the 1990s it has taken on negative connotations. In the last decade, cooperation projects and joint struggles between Palestinians and Israeli Jews have been considered feasible only through professing strong commitments against the military occupation and the ‘normalised’ *status quo*. In detail, see Mohamed Abdel Salam, et al., *What is Normalization?*, 2007.

within the occupation. It does not matter if those who cooperate are against the occupation. This is very problematic since the occupation status still continues to be on the ground between an occupier and an occupied”¹⁴⁵.

Indeed, although the Israeli presence in joint initiatives should mean that they support Palestinian activism, on the contrary, in most cases Israeli Jews have become leading the actors by forcing their politics on Palestinians by means which include the shared projects.

By bearing in mind the complexity of these issues, the following analysis of women’s joint initiatives, and in particular of the most well-known, the *Jerusalem Link*, will aim to suggest that they have been not enough. Such political initiatives have mainly claimed to promote equality and recognition, but always within nationalist schemes; if they had not, reaching the majority of women who participated in their joint narratives would have been unfeasible. The current situation of these initiatives has reflected divergences and unfairness between Palestinian women, as components of the occupied population who have not yet achieved a potential for self-determination, and Israeli Jewish women, as citizens of the occupier state. As an effect of illusory and paralysed joint works, internal mutual relations have also changed within the *Jerusalem Link*, reflecting a deep sense of powerlessness in transforming the discriminatory reality of military occupation.

Asymmetrical relations between Palestinians and Israeli Jews have entered the field of women’s activities and interactions, further inhibiting their politics centred on dialogue and cooperation. In this direction, the above-mentioned context of ‘normalisation’ has also been developed, ignoring the way in which military occupation has weakened women’s rights and empowerment inside their ethno-national narratives. Since the decline of the *Jerusalem Link* coalition became apparent during *Operation Cast Lead* at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009, the reliability gap between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women has worsened even more. In most recent times, women activists from both sides have faced different levels of challenges and obstacles; however, the majority of them, though currently working within the restricted field provided by their own community, have not excluded the possibility of future joint women’s projects.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Haggith Gor, Tel Aviv, December 2, 2009.

3. Earliest Women's Joint Struggles: an Initial Opportunity

As confirmed by what has been already discussed in the previous chapters, Palestinian Arabs and Jews have founded their histories on collective ethno-national identities in order to preserve their own narratives, and in a parallel way, to isolate the opposite 'Other'. Conventional images have represented Zionist newcomers and Palestinian natives as completely separated communities as well as inflexible dichotomies within struggling historical backgrounds. In spite of such a mainstream view, from the time of the first Aliyah in the 1880s, Jews and Palestinians have also produced mutual alternatives and interconnected narratives. Shifting from the Ottoman Empire rule to the British Mandate, and later on to the time of complete Israeli control by military occupation, the land of Palestine may be described as a picture composed by a large mix of people along with their challenging narrative identities that have characterised the inextricability of each history in relation to the others.

In particular, as illustrated in Part I, throughout both Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's narratives emerging from within their own ethno-national backgrounds, women activists have striven to combine the political objectives of achieving women's rights discourses with gendered perspectives related to the macro context of the conflict. In the first part of the XX century, several interconnections between Jewish and Palestinian Arab women who struggled for equal rights and a fair salary took place within their domestic life as well as inside labour movements. Only a few researches have attempted to explore everyday practices and, in particular, shared initiatives between Palestinian Arab and Jewish women since the time of the British Mandate.

3.1. *Women's Cooperation before 1948*

In the earliest years of the 1900s, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women started to launch associations and alliances, such as the one called the *League for Arab-Jewish Friendship* founded in 1921 (Powers, 2006: 1). In order to understand the meaning of the earliest episodes of socio-political interaction among Palestinian Arabs and Jews living in the historic Palestine, it is important to avoid essentialising the two narratives into unchanging frameworks, and also to avoid regarding them exclusively as being in

violent opposition. It is instead more productive to seek to discover examples of joint cooperation. Although the majority of the academic literature regarding the Mandate period has shown a complete division between two monolithic ethno-nationalisms¹⁴⁶, some cases of partnership were also seen, manifested by the way in which “separation is itself a kind of interaction, a dynamic process of response to challenge and threat. It is a process in flux, dynamically responding to specific and changing circumstances” (Bernstein, 2000: 7).

The historian Deborah Bernstein has emphasised this approach in the introduction to her research on cooperation amongst Palestinian and Jewish workforces, involving women as well as men. For instance, in February 1927, at the manufacturing plant called *Nur Match Factory* in Acre, a joint strike, led by Jewish workers together with Palestinian Arabs, lasted for four months and twelve days in consequence of low wages, dangerous working conditions and fruitless negotiations between managers and workers. One of the notable aspects of this action was the prominent inclusion of women, who exchanged mutual support and kept the strike going on despite numerous arrests of male workers and their removal to prison (Bernstein, 1992; Katz, 2003; Katznelson-Shazar, 1975). A small number of academic studies that have dealt with such issues, with Deborah Bernstein observing the emergence of women’s joint labour groups that offered inclusive pictures concerning the socio-political changes of that time. Also in Acre, joint coordination between Palestinian and Jewish women workers assumed an effective role within the struggle by protesting against intolerable working conditions and low-paying skilled jobs (Bernstein, 2000; Katznelson-Shazar, 1975).

Another considerable body of evidence regarding historical women workers’ joint initiatives has been examined by the sociologist Hanna Herzog, who has introduced some examples of the earliest feminist critique that emphasised how women were prevented from participating in the political sphere at that time. Further, in the course of the analysis she brought to bear on women workers involved in joint strikes, she has reported that:

“some women were among the first who identified emerging and intensifying social boundaries between Jews and Arabs and groups within the Jewish community, which in days to come would cause huge conflicts and struggles.

¹⁴⁶ The three main scholars who have conducted researches on mutual understanding and cooperation between Jews and Palestinians before the establishment of the state of Israel are Deborah Bernstein, Zachary Lockman, and Ilan Pappé.

From these early stages women not only discerned the boundaries, they also recognised the arbitrariness, discrimination and injustice embodied in delineation, and therefore called for the subversion of these restrictions” (Herzog in Naveh, 2003: 16).

Looking at the inextricable linkage between Palestinian and Jewish narratives within the specificity of women’s histories prior to 1948, women’s daily interactions attempted to challenge the male-dominated nationalism that was based on separation and hostility between opposite populations. Although they have not been taken into account by the majority of academic researches, the oldest memories I encountered could describe mutual cooperation, and were able to reveal a more humanised perception of the ‘Other’¹⁴⁷. In particular, Jewish women who originally came from Arab countries established close contact with Palestinian women. By exchanging reciprocal support, they developed everyday relationships in contrast with their own conventional nationalist policies, and they called attention to socio-political and territorial consequences related to the waves of Jewish immigration into the historic Palestine. In connection with such joint experiences, Sheila Katz has reported in her historiographic research¹⁴⁸:

“Arab women as well as Jewish women who came from Arab countries made contributions to the survival of the Yishuv. [...] Arab women and Jewish women from Arab countries, who were supposed to be recipients of advanced knowledge from the Europeans, imparted crucial information, supplies and skills that enabled Europeans to survive in a foreign land” (Katz, 2003: 168).

A number of these women joined in the political life, such as Henrietta Szold, who was one of the founders of the international Zionist women’s organisation *Hadassah* and board member of the *Ichud*¹⁴⁹, who openly supported reciprocal cooperation between Palestinian Arabs and Jews (Katz, 2003: 165-177). Since that time, the question of linking women’s common struggles has begun to be placed at the centre

¹⁴⁷ One of the main difficulties of the research has been finding accessible resources, due to the lack of studies on this theme. Because of their challenges to ethno-nationalist boundaries, representations of women’s joint groups have not prevailed; on the contrary, similar women’s narratives have usually been ignored by their respective accounts.

¹⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the nationalist texts produced by Arabs and Jews of that time reduced the women’s role within the two communities in importance: the majority of sources, in which daily images of cooperation between women were narrated, have been discovered in private archives.

¹⁴⁹ It represented one of the most historic political examples of a Palestinian-Jewish joint vision in the direction of a bi-national state in which all communities living on the land of Palestine would be part of a unique entity, with respect to each narrative identity.

of an alternative critical agenda, although ethno-nationalist ideals have continued to confirm women's traditional roles up to the time of the contemporary *status quo*. In fact, whether in the initial period of Yishuv women from different ethno-national, political, and class origins strove against emerging divisions, a few years later the general perception (not only among women, but also within their whole societies) moved towards institutionalised social hierarchies that have become the predominant paradigms of both Palestinian and Israeli Jewish political scenarios.

3.2. *TANDI as the Precursor for Joint Women's Initiatives, and the 1948 War*

Isolated joint examples of women's political activism have created some basic principles of common works and shared ideals, whilst attempting to apply political viewpoints that could challenge the founding pillars of the state of Israel following the tragic events of 1948. As the precursor of those women's joint initiatives that have mainly been established in the 1990s, the most historically significant organisation has been seen to be the *Movement of Democratic Women for Israel (TANDI)*. Since 1948, the Palestinian women citizens of Israel have directed their political support to women in the occupied Palestinian territories, and fought against domestic violence and women's discriminations inside Israeli society (Cockburn, 2007: 112). In a comparable way to that followed by the women's branch of the *Israeli Communist Party*, in which Jews and Palestinians advocated a bi-national, secular, and democratic state for each citizen, *TANDI* activists also introduced internal debates concerning a full equality between Palestinians and Jews within the state of Israel. As declared in their agenda, *TANDI* women promoted:

“a just peace in the region and the world, with coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis; equal rights for women in all areas of life-society, politics, and the workplace; and protection of children's rights and ensuring them a future of peace and security” (Powers, 2006: 104).

Along its political pathway, the movement organised frequent initiatives and demonstrations in solidarity with the everyday difficulties of Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, underlining the inevitability of a joint struggle that had to be critical of the Zionist discriminatory policy (Pouzol, 2008: 108-110). Due to the strict

correlation between their double struggles for women's rights equality and for an Israeli democratic society that could fairly include Palestinian Arabs, *TANDI* has represented one of the major political examples that have been able to emphasise real connections involving both Palestinian and Jewish women. Indeed, while a number of other significant women's experiences have resisted patriarchal ethno-nationalist views, the dominant narratives, which have focused on violent clashes between conflicting identities, have remained the basis of the only conventional strategies so far.

4. Women's Joint Politics beyond Fragmented Identities

Only at the beginning of the 1990s, both in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories, did women's organisations decide to take up again the advocacy of political alternatives which were in contrast with the male-dominated power systems. Even more, bearing in mind past joint initiatives (as just above-mentioned), they began to explore from within the complexity of identities and differences through a shared process that has required "constant tending and mending" (Emmett, 2003: 16). Working from each ethno-national perspective, this approach has tried to sustain dialogue, and also to pursue concrete achievements, involving women of both sides in attempting to face up to their identity issues as well as to recognise the 'Other' not only as an enemy. From that time, Palestinian-Israeli and international joint women's activism has started to be developed "between Arab and Jewish women resident within Israel's pre-1967 borders, between Israeli women and Palestinian women from West Bank and Gaza; and between Jewish and Palestinian women worldwide" (Pope in Afshar, 1993: 172).

4.1. Interconnecting Political and Daily Struggles

By means of sharing politics and everyday challenges, women have understood the need to avoid segregating each part inside their own community, whilst they have been able to develop a unique space where their experiences could engender a wider impact on both societies. Moreover, mutual trust has been considered as a fundamental political step among opposite standpoints, since each partner should sit at the same table dealing with the facts on the ground and the problematic situations having been

assigned equal power. If this were not the case, as happened in the end of the majority of such joint political pathways, the gap between the two sides would not produce any successful result¹⁵⁰. Everyday interactions between ‘occupied’ and ‘occupier’ should be central in the real comprehension of peace relationships set up by women’s movements, but most of the efforts labelled under coexistence have not played in egalitarian dynamics, paralysing the following stages of the reconciliation process.

In a number of the personal stories of women I interviewed, their initial involvement within Palestinian-Israeli joint activities has usually begun in mixed groups of women and men. Afterwards, they have decided to move towards only-women coalitions that have been mainly engaged in feminist struggles. One of the most significant examples has been described by a leading activist of *Ta’ayush (Arab-Jewish Partnership)* and member of the *Coalition of Women for Peace*, Khulood Badawi, who has explained:

“I grew up politically in different circumstances anti-occupation movements in Israel within joint Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel groups. [...] When I started with *Ta’ayush* we thought that it was very important to bring people against the occupation, to do politics, to give them chance to meet and struggle together. I believe in joint initiatives only at one condition, if they have political effects, political actions, not just talking. [...] From these mixed experiences I have moved to women’s organizations, and in particular I support the *Women Coalition for Peace* in Israel and their involvement in the socio-economic situation of the country because if you want to improve the gendered and social equality within Israel, you have to end the occupation”¹⁵¹.

Another similar story has been illustrated by the earliest political activism of one of the foremost feminists in Haifa, Edna Zaretsky-Toledano, who was involved in joint groups such as *Musharaka (Partnership)*:

“we tried to create a just co-existence between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel (because in those days the majority of Palestinians in Israel did not define themselves as Palestinians but as Arabs). I was engaged in creating encounters of Jews and Arabs that enabled the participants to share with others their personal histories and narratives, their feelings, ideas and ideals, and to reflect and question their own concepts, knowledge and their interpretation of reality. [...] At the beginning I was not active in the feminist movement, it took me time to be aware of the centrality of the gender aspects and their linkage in the everyday life: I facilitated several groups of Palestinian and Jewish women and I

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Molly Malekar, Jerusalem, October 19, 2009.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Khulood Badawi, East Jerusalem, December 6, 2009.

understood that they could open themselves to the sorrow and the agony of the ‘Other’ in different ways”¹⁵².

And, specifically, speaking about her experience within Palestinian-Israeli women’s joint groups, she has clarified:

“I have been a coordinator of such an effort to work together. I believe that since we are women we have the potential to be more attentive towards the other side and since we feel responsibility for our reality we should try and create bonds between us in order to change our society. The problem is that these activities are very limited, in the sense that the reality is a reality of occupation and, sometimes, joint groups can be seen as tools that allow the military occupation to go on. We had difficulties with some Palestinian groups of women because they were afraid that it could be transformed into normalisation or perceived as such”¹⁵³.

4.2. *‘Transversal Politics’: What a Challenge*

Since their initial struggles as activists and academics, feminist researchers have become aware of the importance of studying the mutual relationships existing among multiple narrative identities as well as their social connections. In this context, the political challenge identified as ‘transversal politics’ has emerged as an essential preliminary in the process of translating theoretical analyses to everyday practices through what has been described as ‘shifting and rooting’¹⁵⁴. This innovative approach has represented a key element in moving the basic understanding of joint projects, enabling progression beyond the idea of the ‘Other’ and the establishment of a mutual recognition among narratives. By questioning real and illusory perceptions of the other side, the most problematic achievement of shared approaches has been the process of building up mutual trust and awareness. In this sense, ‘transversal politics’ means to construct connections within women’s communities, in order to refute unbalanced

¹⁵² Interview with Edna Zaretsky-Toledano, Haifa, November 10, 2009.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ In pointing to the multiplicity of women’s contexts and perspectives, the expression was invented by Italian feminist groups (especially from Women in Black and Women’s Centres in Bologna and Torino), who worked with other feminist activists from ethno-national conflicts, such as the Balkans and Israel/Palestine. During the 1990s, they organised a number of meetings among women from clashing sides with the purpose of supporting their feminist perspective concerning ethno-national identity boundaries.

differences, but at the same time to face the significance of heterogeneous internal components.

In the course of this constructive debate, the feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis, one of the first intellectuals who have depicted such a concept both in women's grassroots activism and in the academic world, has explained that 'transversal politics' is founded on the following features:

“first, standpoint epistemology, which recognises that from each positioning the world is seen differently; [...] secondly, an important concept in relation to transversal politics is the encompassment of difference by equality. This means the recognition, on the one hand, that differences are important, but on the other hand, that notions of difference should encompass, rather than replace, notions of equality; [...] thirdly, transversal politics is based on a conceptual - and political - differentiation between positioning, identity and values” (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 94-95).

Yuval-Davis has suggested the possibility of making feasible an alternative paradigm beyond universalistic viewpoints, and beyond the exclusive nationalist identities that have dominated and transformed the current societies into homogenised realities. Throughout their mutual dialogues and actions, women may recognise each specific positioning as a state which is not immobile; in addition, they may renovate their own different narrative identities by means of continuous exchanges with other women involved in such political processes.

With regard to the implication of ethno-national identities in the Palestinian as well as in the Israeli communities, the possibility of improvement through crossing borders between opposite narratives has undoubtedly been put into question through actual experience with women's shared works, and by the critical points of view these have generated. Therefore, as maintained by the feminist researcher Cynthia Cockburn, problematic cooperation should not only denounce the oppressor, but should also strengthen internal relationships, whilst affirming their challenging differences (Cockburn, 1999: 114). The mutual influence between the inevitability of separating historical socio-political situations and the will to overcome fragmentations of identity has represented the core of women's joint political activism, pursuing the aim of embracing diversities that have attempted to oppose imbalanced and violent attitudes. From such standpoints, women's joint initiatives have given priority to marginalised

people in order to provide alternatives to the hierarchies of oppression that continue to exist in numerous contexts.

Several feminist theorists and activists have focussed their efforts on connecting women, starting with their own communities. In fact, engaging women directly in socio-political movements has been one of the preliminary stages towards giving voice to women's representative and participative systems. Nevertheless, the feminist activist Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas has expressed perplexity concerning her national as well as feminist identities, saying that "as Palestinian or Israeli women it is difficult to see each other through the feminist lenses, because we see each other as enemies"¹⁵⁵. However, women have directly experienced internal societal inequalities, and, thus:

"we are able to struggle against parallel issues, such as hegemony, patriarchy, dominance, militarism. We both can see a common agenda. I want to get rid of occupation, they want to get rid of militaristic hegemonic dominance over their lives. We have to move from our private sphere to the public one, becoming aware of the deep linkage between the two, in particular the militaristic hegemonic dominance existing in our occupied lives. [...] My mind does not work on excluding the others, my mind always works on including the others"¹⁵⁶.

An additional concept to be analysed regarding identity differences in relation to 'transversal politics' has dealt with the approach of 'intersectionality'. As a guiding principle, this has been introduced in academic and in grassroots feminist theories by means of socio-political critiques of women of colour between the 1970s and 1980s. Using such a term, the scholar Kimberle Crenshaw has explained the way through which women's identities and their relation with the entire structural-political system need to be deconstructed, in particular among race, class and gender narratives. She has stated that the process of 'intersectionality' "denotes the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences" (Crenshaw, 1989: 139). This implies that the point at issue may be not only a matter of differences among identities, but also of differences that involve structural positions within collective interactions.

In particular, narrative identities need to be examined by exploring how they are interrelated and mutually constructed. By taking into account the variety of contextual histories in which women are positioned (along with their experiences of subordination

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas, Ramallah, December 9, 2009.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

and, at the same time, their active roles), ‘intersectionality’ has redefined each individual, shifting positionality in parallel to the asymmetrical *status quo* of power and privileges. In this prospect, more comprehensive studies may identify multiple social hierarchies that have reproduced systems of inequalities within close intersections of clashing national, gender, and class narratives. Since feminist scholars have founded the majority of their critiques on linking theory with social reality experiences, the deconstruction of mainstream categories has been involved in the deconstruction of unequal social relations. In approaching multifaceted intersectionalities, it may overcome disciplinary boundaries and, on the contrary, it may advance multiple dimensions of research work directed towards the complexity of social life (McCall, 2005).

A further contribution to the status of ‘intersectionality’ as a research paradigm has been put forward by the political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock, who has described six key assumptions:

- “a) more than one category of difference is implicated in the examination of political processes and problems;
- b) while the categories of difference should be equally attended to in research, their interrelation is an open empirical question;
- c) categories of difference are the dynamic productions of individual and institutional factors;
- d) each category of difference has within-group diversity;
- e) categories are examined at multiple levels of analysis;
- f) as a normative and empirical paradigm, intersectionality requires attention to both the empirical and theoretical” (Hancock, 2007: 251).

In this direction, Nira Yuval-Davis has suggested that such a conceptual framework is not only based on an analysis of relationships among diversities, but it has also made it possible to discover how different analytical levels are connected with each other (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 195).

Following such analyses of the situation within national women’s movements and women’s joint initiatives, the feminist activist Erella Shadmi has recognised that:

“the women’s movement has failed because they have not connected different perspectives. Where are the theoretical connections and the implications on the ground? We have to use to speak about these interconnections in order to develop political strategies. [...] You cannot have only a white feminist movement in a non-white society, you cannot understand everybody, and you do not represent anyone you are talking about. We need to talk with women who

have different visions, we need to have dialogue with women who do not agree with us. We have to recognise differences inside each community as starting point”¹⁵⁷.

As a result of variable identities, ‘transversal politics’ has to deal with the question of dialogue, applying its theoretical background to specific encounters among women divided by conflict and post-conflict realities. In fact, the recognition of the Others’ positioning and identities has assumed a growing function within women’s joint struggles. Since the feminist theories and practices considered above are particularly related to the critical standpoints of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women, a number of women-only initiatives have opened shared narratives concerning the ongoing status of militarised oppressions and discriminations. In line with such visions, in Palestine/Israel women’s joint practices have taken into consideration these crucial correlations:

“between different systems of domination and structured inequalities grounded in disparities of power and privilege; between practices of violence used against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the increase of violence against women in Israel; between struggles of Palestinians in the occupied territories and women in Israel for liberation and self-determination” (Sharoni, 1995: 119-120).

Nonetheless, most of the Palestinian-Israeli women’s joint projects have preserved the *status quo* and protected the hegemonic power of the dominant side, by maintaining a gap between the historic proposals on which the initiatives have been based and what has actually been transformed in reality. For this reason, many women interviewees, in particular Palestinians, have described joint works in terms of being a ‘normalised’ illusion of equality, through which a deeper discrimination between ‘occupier’ and ‘occupied’ has continued to grow. As will be suggested in detail in the last part of the dissertation, women activists have needed to problematise once again the meaning of their solidarity among shared experiences and comprehensive differences, going beyond controversial deep-seated walls and boundaries.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Erella Shadmi, Haifa, September 14, 2010.

5. Women's Coalitions¹⁵⁸: Examining the Experience of the Jerusalem Link

Defined as the true child of Oslo, the *Jerusalem Link* might represent the emblematic outcome of joint initiatives, typifying what has been and what the current status is of the debate within Palestinian-Israeli joint projects. Since the uprising of the first *Intifadah*, women activists from both sides started to think about institutionalising shared politics between women from East and West Jerusalem, so as to contribute through women's participation in their own communities as well as with the 'Other' (Badran in Kaufman-Lacusta, 2010: 137-138). As the feminist activist Judy Blanc has remembered:

“with the beginning of the first *Intifadah* we developed a number of political activities in which we constructed linkages and projects together with Palestinian women. This was conceived in long-term political thought, both national and feminist”¹⁵⁹.

5.1. Step-by-Step Analysis of Women's Joint Pathway

The first formalised conference, which was brought into being on a dialogue basis by sixty Israeli Jewish and Palestinian women (from the West Bank, Gaza Strip and the diaspora), was entitled *Give Peace a Chance - Women Speak Out* and took place in Brussels in May 1989¹⁶⁰. A few months later, about six thousand women, among which were representatives of the *Palestinian Women's Working Committees* and the *Israeli Women Peace Coalition*, marched from West to East Jerusalem under the banner 'Women Go For Peace' (Sharoni in Kandiyoti, 1996: 107). In addition to formal politics, women wanted to combine practical solutions with political actions in opposition to the dominance of Israeli military occupation over the Palestinian

¹⁵⁸ In using the expression of joint coalitions between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women, I refer to women from the West Bank and Israel, not to joint initiatives within the Jewish state. In the latter case, in particular during my conversations with Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel, women explained to me their own meanings of 'coexistence' related to the internal Israeli reality since it could not be possible to apply it to the 'occupier-occupied' paradigm. Nevertheless, a number of Israeli interviewees have encountered shared experiences inside Israel, rather than in cooperation with Palestinian women from the occupied territories.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Judy Blanc, Jerusalem, October 27, 2009.

¹⁶⁰ On the initiative of Simone Susskind, president of the *Centre for Secular Humanistic Judaism* in Belgium, it has represented one of the earliest international meetings between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women.

population. In this way, the first *Intifadah* meant a central turning point in activating massive women's mobilisation through feminist solidarity as a result of the promising political panorama that was broadening at that time.

Since then, a number of women's international meetings have been organised, aimed at addressing three main problem areas by adopting a feminist approach. The scholar Simona Sharoni has identified the first of these areas as the marginalisation of women from peace negotiations at every political level, the second as the differing political perceptions existing between male-dominated and feminist interpretations, and the third as the necessity for a women's visibility in power gendered relationships (Sharoni in Kandiyoti, 1996: 107-109). From this perspective, the creation of women's networks has opened a shared process in which women activists have attempted to balance their ethno-national collective identities with their being women within patriarchal and militarised societies.

In 1993, a group of Israeli Jewish and Palestinian women created the *Jerusalem Link*, one of the most internationally renowned women's joint initiatives, with the funding of the European Union. The Israeli side, represented by *Bat Shalom (Daughter of Peace)* and including Palestinian citizens of Israel, has defined itself as a 'feminist organisation' belonging to the Israeli peace movement, while Palestinian women, led by the *Markaz al-Quds la l-Nissah (Jerusalem Center for Women - JCW)*, have expressed their consciousness-raising politics in connection with national aspirations subjugated by external military occupation. The two women's centres have continued to control their own staff and internal strategies, agreeing to work both jointly and on their own for the reason that they have at the same time needed to encourage partnerships as well as to maintain their autonomy (Jacoby, 2005: 79-89).

Each organisation has promoted a joint vision towards common fundamental beliefs, such as the recognition of self-determination of the Palestinian people, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel in accordance with international law, and the most controversial topic of sharing Jerusalem, as will be explained in the following sub-paragraph (Cockburn, 2007: 112-115). Stressing each one's autonomy, the Palestinian project-coordinator Mariam Ikerawi has affirmed that:

“also if we have joint projects, we are two independent organizations. I am proud of the Palestinian side of the *Jerusalem Link*: we do not work just because

we want an Israeli partnership, rather we have political principles that we work upon. We never forgot them. [...] As they want security we want safety. We simply want to live a normal life”¹⁶¹.

By implementing a feminist position, they have pointed out particular approaches which can be used to face up to misleading stereotypes. As Galia Golan, one of the founding members, has written looking back over her personal experience of feminist peace activist in Israel:

“in what is called a joint venture for peace and the empowerment of women, Israeli and Palestinian women view dialogue as a key to change and the resolution of conflict. [...] It is now that we must call upon all our resources and mutuality as women to preserve the understanding that had been achieved, to overcome the increased difficulties between our communities and within our communities, in the realm of women’s rights, in the realm of human and national rights” (Golan, 1997: 585-586).

Bringing to mind other historic examples of women’s peace activism, above all *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina and *Black Sash* in South Africa, they have articulated critical statements about the linkage between militarised ethno-nationalisms and women’s narratives, stressing in particular the way through which the Israeli military occupation has oppressed women, from the West Bank, Gaza Strip and within Israel as well.

In-between grassroots and political elite involvement, they called for peace and women’s empowerment through a cooperation system among Israeli Jews and Palestinians. As they stated in the *Declaration of Principles*:

“the realization of political peace will pave the way for mutual understanding and trust, genuine security, and constructive cooperation on the basis of equality and respect for the national and human rights of both peoples. Women must be central partners in the peace process. Their active and equal participation in decision-making and negotiations is crucial to the fulfilment of a just and viable peace”¹⁶².

¹⁶¹ Interview with Mariam Ikermawi, Beit Hanina, October 11, 2009.

¹⁶² A detailed analysis of *Bat Shalom* has been proposed by Cynthia Cockburn in *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (1998), focusing on diverse projects and viewpoints existing within the network of women peace activists. More information is available at <URL:<http://www.batshalom.org>>

Another founder of the coalition, Gila Svirky, has continued to give emphasis to the powerful role of joint statements by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women, struggling together to end the occupation as well as bearing in mind that:

“it is critical that women go beyond nationalism because otherwise we cannot understand the other point of view. I do not understand their narratives; they do not understand my narrative. It is not about necessarily an agreement, but to figure out the existing situation”¹⁶³.

Within the *Jerusalem Link*, the necessity of establishing effective women’s political strategies has been determined by the fact that military occupation has produced huge ramifications of gendered discriminations and rights’ violations. In this way, sharing experiences of suffering has been considered one of the most striking political tools which can be deployed in order to remove unbalanced relations between the two sides and to offer an alternative pathway of empathy.

5.2. *Women’s Joint Political Actions as a Challenge to Peace Resolution*

Differentiating themselves from the hegemonic idea of power applied by men, women’s joint politics has been mostly characterised by open-minded dialogue and mutual understanding. In this direction, women from the *Jerusalem Link* have worked to dismantle the dehumanization of the enemy, especially through grassroots participation rather than elitist approaches. Due to their deeper commitment in the everyday life of militarised societies, women have tackled more pragmatic matters within the context of a peace agenda (Golan and Kamal, 2005/6: 61-63). By preventing ethno-nationalist prejudices and inequalities, joint key issues founded on shared women’s experiences have led to interrelated processes mainly symbolised by the ‘personal is political’ standpoint, both at the individual and collective level. However, also in this focus, there has been a misinterpretation of such a political historic standpoint within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as demonstrated by the scholar Sophie Richter-Devroe:

¹⁶³ Interview with Gila Svirsky, Jerusalem, December 8, 2009.

“the prioritizing of personal over political change in women’s joint conflict resolution does exactly what the slogan ‘the personal is political’ was trying to prevent: it detaches individual personal problems from broader material injustices and, as a solution to the conflict, proposes individual agency through dialogue, empathy and understanding rather than collective action. In doing so, it offers little potential of reaching up to effect political changes” (Richter-Devroe in Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009: 174).

Across dialogue and social mobilisation, women have declared themselves able to plan peace alternatives to which they could bring active positions by means of mutual recognition and egalitarian principles. According to women’s challenges in opposition to deep-seated national identities, ‘transversal politics’ might provide a common ground for recognising different impacts of the conflict on women’s everyday lives and struggles. For example, one of the most recent initiatives has been a three year dialogue program between young Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women from four different groups in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Jenin, who have used both joint meetings and parallel works. Going into such a project called *Women Defying Barrier*, as declared in their booklet (Jerusalem, 2009), two main objectives have been promoted in order to sharpen critical perspectives within the present deadlock: firstly educating to deal with the conflict and, secondly, clarifying issues related to the promotion of peace in the final stages of negotiations.

The *Jerusalem Link* has also focused on the importance of UN Security Council Resolution 1325¹⁶⁴ and, as a consequence, on women’s international involvement in peace building programs. Such women’s experiences have represented alternative models of ways of becoming aware of the value of international law and human rights in peace-making mechanisms. Both the *Jerusalem Center for Women* and *Bat Shalom* have raised the earliest women’s initiatives working on 1325 Resolution, through which they have connected political outcomes implied by international law with civil society and grassroots peace movements. Women’s participation in conflict resolution has been regarded as necessary in order to increase gendered consciousness inside each community, with the purpose of identifying alternative ways of interpreting peace.

Thus, from this theoretical prospect, some Palestinian, Israeli and international women have brought into being a further coalition, called *International Women’s*

¹⁶⁴ *Resolution 1325* was adopted by UN Security Council on the 31st October 2000 with the focus on two main goals: expressing concern about civilians, especially women and children, in conflict and post-conflict situations, as well as affirming the central role of women in peace resolution and conflict prevention. The document is available at <URL:http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf>

*Commission (IWC)*¹⁶⁵, with the aim of contributing to achieve a just and sustainable peace between Palestinians and Israeli Jews towards mutual recognition and reconciliation. Women political activists from the occupied Palestinian territories as well as from Israel have expressed their concerns about this issue, as articulated by one of the most prominent leaders within the Palestinian women's movement, Amal Khreishe:

“raising the voice of women for a just sustainable peace and not dealing with security only from a territorial and military approach, but instead from a gendered perspective. The concept of UN Resolution 1325 is dealing with security and protection; the IWC uses this tool as opportunity to make Israel accountable in front of international law”¹⁶⁶.

Although they have attempted to follow diverse types of shared encounters, such as dialogue groups, women's peace conferences, collaborative projects and solidarity initiatives (Sharoni, 1995: 138-149), their socio-political proposals have not been achieved yet. During the last years, a feminist critical debate about and within Palestinian and Israeli women of the *Jerusalem Link* has taken place throughout marginalised and discriminatory frameworks: the asymmetry between the 'occupier' and the 'occupied' is still in existence. On the one hand, Palestinian women have trusted in the political transformation of the 'Other', while their Israeli Jewish counterparts have believed in building bridges based more on personal relationships between women from the two sides. An example of this has been demonstrated by the major value of interpersonal meetings among Israeli women peace activists from different political experiences (Jacoby, 2005: 82-83).

The prevalent Israeli conceptual framework has been built on the belief that women's empowerment might start from the awareness concerning their own identity, by giving women an alternative voice where they have been generally excluded from decision-making positions. In fact, whilst Israeli Jewish women have consciously stressed their determination in reflecting on feminist assumptions, Palestinian women have instead rarely adopted (only in few occasions and just through leading representatives) such a strong feminist attitude, and this has not often included their political objectives of supporting the national struggle. Nonetheless, both Palestinian

¹⁶⁵ More detailed information about its Charter of Principles, members, statements and works is available at <URL:<http://www.iwc-peace.org>>

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Amal Khreishe, Ramallah, December 9, 2009.

and Israeli Jewish women have experienced several forms of oppression, gender discriminations and injustices that have allowed them to share their daily private lives through a feminist consciousness. In fact, even though the widespread disparity between ‘occupied’ and ‘occupier’ has persisted up until the present, women have realised the centrality of their role by attempting to create a joint political view.

5.3. *(Dis)Illusioned Expectations and Related Matters*

In the last few years, current political strategies have been questioned by seeking shared agreements within the *Jerusalem Link* on the crucial issues, agreements that have addressed the effects of structural violence on women’s everyday life (Powers, 2006: 6-13). However, throughout the coalition’s nine-point statement, Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women have avoided the most controversial discussions in relation to the contentious topics, such as, almost prominently, the idea of sharing Jerusalem and the Right of Return of Palestinian refugees, in order to reach a sort of compromise.

Indeed, a feasible joint agreement would have needed a courageous declaration concerning Jerusalem as the capital for the two sovereign states. Although a significant initiative entitled *Sharing Jerusalem: Two Capitals for Two States* was organised in June 1997 with the intention of increasing basic standards of joint work not only among institutionalised negotiations, but also at the level of civil society, no resolution about the future of Jerusalem has been ever adopted. In the current *status quo* of military occupation in East Jerusalem, Palestinian expropriations, house demolitions, and progressive restrictions of movement for the Palestinian Jerusalemites, this has continued to represent the most challenging obstacle to any peaceful joint agreement.

Moreover, in relation to the other main controversial topic, that is the Right of Return, a just solution for the Palestinian diaspora in accordance with UN Resolutions has been taken into consideration neither within joint politics nor as a required step for building up a reconciliation process. Although women members of the coalition have started to discuss such contentious arguments, ethno-nationalist identity boundaries have been intensified by the worsening of the situation on the ground, which has removed the possibility of a true mutual understanding.

Despite some initial proposals which grew out of egalitarian dialogical relationships, at the present time the *Jerusalem Link*’s project is seen as a failure in part,

if not totally. As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, throughout my thesis I have drawn on definitions and expressions determined directly by women interviewees. During our meetings, the vast majority of them have stressed their disillusionment in reaching their initial political aims, especially within the context of joint initiatives. To bring the theoretical aspect into comparison with the finding of my fieldwork, it has emerged that women activists involved in such joint initiatives have recognised the significant differences between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish perspectives towards their perception of nationalism and its linkage with women's feminist engagements. As a result, most of them, mainly from the Israeli side, have not been able to critically examine the structural issues at the core of the conflict related to the persistence of military occupation and power inequalities, rather envisioning shared futures far from the reality on the ground.

In addition to this critique on the difficulty of overcoming challenging issues, relational disputes have embodied different perceptions of powers and privileges between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women. As the leading activist of *Physicians for Human Rights* and *New Profile*, Bilha Golan, has underlined:

“in the past there were many projects that we called ‘cooperation’, for instance, during the first *Intifadah* between Palestinian women from the West Bank, Jewish Israeli women and Palestinian Israeli women. However, we have to remember that in the first stage of the *Intifadah* men were in prison, so women became very empowered, very strong, there was cooperation between the two sides. On the other hand, in the second *Intifadah* women had a secondary place. And in Israel too. Since women's politics became so weak, we stopped: today ‘coexistence’ is a very ugly word. Most of joint projects ended, the only reason why some of them have continued is related to getting money from international donors”¹⁶⁷.

Looking back over the long-term, an egalitarian commitment has seemed to be unachievable due to the prominent asymmetry that the Israeli partnership has deployed towards the Palestinians. For this reason, numerous Palestinian women interviewees do not believe anymore in joint projects because they consider it unfair to compare their own unprivileged situation with the Israeli Jewish one. In these terms, Rania Khayyat has stated that:

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Bilha Golan, East Jerusalem, November 25, 2009.

“joint projects cannot be successful because you cannot compare a Palestinian woman with an Israeli Jewish woman. If you see the life conditions of both, you will feel that Israeli Jewish women are living a better life than Palestinian women. Maybe, in a few cases, if you make a valuable project, at the end you will find that Israeli women are able to know how Palestinian women live. This could be the best result, but it is not enough”¹⁶⁸.

The equality standpoint has been at the centre of the majority of my interviews, specifically with Palestinian women, as the most fundamental aim to be achieved in order to support future political alternatives along with their Israeli Jewish counterpart. The socio-political inequality among women’s everyday conditions of life has been increased in the most recent years, and, consequently, it has rejected the creation of an egalitarian and democratic system throughout the historic Palestine. This status of asymmetry has also existed between Israeli Jewish and Palestinian women peace activists, shaping their common ground within the Israeli internal political debate. In questioning the ongoing ‘normalised’ military occupation, the most radical Israeli Jews and the majority of Palestinians that I interviewed have stressed how the ‘occupier-occupied’ and ‘oppressor-oppressed’ paradigms have influenced the predominant narrative of the powerful side, denying a real process of mutual recognition and reconciliation.

In fact, this issue has been one of the most problematic obstacles between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women, as one of the Palestinian founders of the *Jerusalem Link*, Huda al-Imam, has clearly expressed through these words:

“I believe that recognition is the first step, before starting any negotiation and thinking about reconciliation, in order to have people realise how is the situation. Only after that reconciliation will come. As Palestinians we feel that Israelis have to clear from what they have done to the Palestinian people in the past”¹⁶⁹.

Within the younger women’s joint groups too, further separations connected with their everyday life experiences have taken effect between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. On such a subject, Gali Agnon, a young Israeli Jewish peace activist, has recognised that:

“there are many disparities between us, from religion to social realities; but freedom is the central issue. They are living under occupation, whilst we are

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Rania Khayyat, Ramallah, October 12, 2009.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Huda al-Imam, East Jerusalem, September 20, 2010.

free. Actually, as peace activists we are not so much free within our state, but anyway we are freer than them. We are not at the same level at all. Moreover, I would like to meet Palestinian women not because they are Palestinians and I am Israeli, but because we have something else to talk about”¹⁷⁰.

As already described by previous analyses, Palestinians have claimed their own roots in the national liberation movement, while Israeli Jews have been more interested in the construction of personal and intimate relationships from a feminist point of view. In particular, taking into account the heterogeneous perspectives existing within the Israeli women’s movement (though strongly influenced by the Ashkenazi hegemony), the presence of Palestinian women of Israel has been useful in creating strong bonds between them and Palestinian women from the occupied territories, overcoming a further intra-Palestinian asymmetrical partition. Another major internal Israeli question has dealt with Mizrahi women’s political activism: since 1994 *Bat Shalom* projects have involved women from the Mizrahi deprived neighbourhoods, attempting to enlarge the peace activist camp through inclusion of the unprivileged and to promote Mizrahi women’s empowerment (Jacoby, 2005: 85-89). However, problematic interactions have continued to characterise an ongoing state of tension within the constituency of Israeli women’s background.

Realising they were losing most of their political shared agenda, since the end of 1990s a number of Palestinian women from the *Jerusalem Link* have decided to abandon the coalition, giving as their reason the demise of what has been called ‘peace resolution’ and the consequent frustration within the Palestinian population. The upsurge of the second *Intifadah* in 2000, and the most recent 2008/9 *Operation Cast Lead* in Gaza have disrupted the general scenario, in addition to changing women’s perspectives concerning dialogue and joint works. The brutality of violence perpetrated by the Israeli army along with the increase of ‘normalisation’ in both societies have produced profound divisions and conflict over the ethical commitments of women political activists, including those working inside the *Jerusalem Link*. In particular, within the Palestinian side, the head of the board of the *Jerusalem Center for Women*, Rula Salameh, has stated that:

“after Gaza all of us agreed to leave joint projects, we decided to re-read our agenda and to work in two ways: ninety-five per cent of the work will be

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Gali Agnon, East Jerusalem, October 14, 2009.

towards partnerships with Palestinian locals, five per cent will be towards *Bat Shalom*, not other Israeli Jewish organisations. After Gaza nothing will be the same”¹⁷¹.

In addition, within each community, women have struggled to overcome suspicion from those of their fellow-citizens who have not tolerated joint projects in the current climate of escalation of violence. Women’s joint testimonies have often lost active support from their own public opinion because their internal legitimacy has been challenged, especially in those instances when women activists have been considered as traitors. A lot of misinterpretations have been originated from the difficulty of explaining and demonstrating the basic principles of joint actions, particularly within the Palestinian society. In this sense, one of the main critiques has emphasised the gap between women involved in these joint initiatives that have mostly represented the elite, and grassroots women activists that have been not integrated into such a system.

In the course of the majority of interviews that I conducted with Palestinian members of the *Jerusalem Link*, the interviewees explained that a significant number of people have condemned their choice of continuing with joint projects. In detail, as previously described in chapter three and four regarding Palestinian and Israeli women’s internal debates, the process of ‘NGOization’ has been widely criticised. This process has also influenced some joint initiatives, with foreign donors shaping and supporting several agendas whilst working under the label of the mainstream conflict resolution theories, starting with dialogue and coexistence among former enemies. In such controversial situations, women who have attempted to cross borders and walls have been often forced to pay the price of being frozen out of their own national collectivity. As stated by Mariam Ikerawi:

“after 2000, as *Jerusalem Center for Women* we have realised that we have also to work with the Palestinians regarding only-Palestinian projects in order to maintain our sustainability inside the Palestinian society. The Palestinian-Israeli projects can be part of the strategy but cannot be all the strategy. Nowadays, after Gaza, the Palestinian-Israeli work takes just the five per cent of the overall system. [...] However, we have been stigmatised and isolated by the Palestinian society and NGOs for having this joint agenda: they have said that we cannot be a legal part of the NGOs coalition if we do not change our agenda”¹⁷².

¹⁷¹ Interview with Rula Salameh, Ramallah, October 21, 2010.

¹⁷² Interview with Mariam Ikerawi, Beit Hanina, October 11, 2009.

Although women from the coalition have admitted the necessity of dialogical initiatives between the two sides, many of them have openly questioned whether their projects should have come to an end or whether their political engagement should be carried on.

6. Prospects of Alternative Pathways

Reflecting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the macro level, the illegal and cruel conditions of the military occupation have produced deep inequalities in an ‘apparent’ dialogue: Israeli women, within the occupier side, have a state and rights, while Palestinian women, as occupied, do not. A few years after the drawing up of the Oslo Accords, the ‘normalisation’ of the *status quo* has implied the absolute legitimisation of responsibilities of the Jewish state of Israel, as if the Palestinian cause had been already resolved (Golan, 1995). Taking into consideration the collapse of the majority of joint initiatives, several women interviewees have cast doubt on the real meaning of cooperation between Palestinians and Israeli Jews, seeing this as merely a political platform.

6.1. Internal Debates and Contradictory Prospects

As mainly highlighted by the Palestinian interviewees, the relationship between Israeli Jewish and Palestinian women has been based on critical and active struggles to overcome the illegal military occupation and to defend fundamental rights, seeing that “Israeli women can become closer to us when they will work more against their own political-military establishment. Without talking about the Palestinian self-determination we, as women, cannot discuss on women’s rights and equality”¹⁷³. Nevertheless, since similar political challenges have been discussed by women activists in contradictory terms, the idea of dialoguing with the ‘Other’ has seemed to be feasible only in rare situations where oppression and humiliation have produced less conflicting gaps. The unsuccessful conclusion of the majority of alternative political discourses,

¹⁷³ Interview with Khitam Saafin, Ramallah, October 19, 2009.

among them the *Jerusalem Link*, where Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women have attempted to reach a kind of ‘shared negotiation’, has been considered by the sociologist Nahla Abdo as follows:

“the failure of these forms of ‘talks’ or however one refers to them is that the talkers cannot stand on a par with each other and are not negotiating from a basic common understanding of the identity and nature of the oppressor and the identity and nature of the oppressed” (Abdo in Abdo and Lentin, 2002: 2).

Within the Israeli Jewish women’s framework, Zionism and its effects on the Jewish state as well as on the occupied territories has represented one of the main subjects that should be analysed in depth in order to understand whether the ethnic definition of Israel is in contradiction with democratic values and a common future with the Palestinian people¹⁷⁴. Zionist and non-Zionist activists from the *Jerusalem Link* have needed to reconsider the original idea of the establishment of the Jewish state in seeking a feasible political strategy for the resolution of the conflict. In the Israeli Jewish *status quo*, the majority of peace organisations have lost determination and hope in carrying forward joint initiatives along with the Palestinians. Even so, such a debate has influenced women’s joint initiatives, questioning and breaking some strongly-held mainstream beliefs at a time when women have not been taking an active part in the political agenda.

In spite of this, they have shown their strong capability for shaping feminist frameworks in the current phase of incommunicability between the two sides. As suggested by one of the Palestinian leaders of the women’s movement in Israel, Nabila Espanioly, expressing her viewpoint about the *Jerusalem Link*:

“although in its structures of understanding there were two identities, two units, they wanted to use a way of doing through only one voice in which there was no more an occupied and an occupier: all of them should be equals, but the result has been nothing. It did not have a clear political goal, it did not change the political discourse. Most of the times these joint projects were created to protect and to keep the *status quo*. [...] Nevertheless, I cannot blame the Jerusalem Link in comparison with the current situation where we are, but we need a deeper political understanding, it is not enough saying to end the occupation. It is more important to speak about recognition, let’s recognise who is the occupier and

¹⁷⁴ The status of Israeli democracy has been discussed by many Palestinian and Israeli Jewish academics, and also by international scholars. Regarding the most controversial issues on Zionism considered within the Israeli Jewish women’s movement, see the last paragraph of chapter four.

who is the occupied, let's recognise that Palestine has been occupied since 1948 and nowadays it is only the 22 per cent of the historical land"¹⁷⁵.

6.2. *Filling Gaps between Reality and Joint Future*

Although on the one hand the necessity of affirming 'Other' narratives among women has recently declined, on the other hand joint perspectives have provided an additional opportunity to test the societal development of mutual trust and recognition¹⁷⁶ between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. At the same time, upcoming joint initiatives would need to understand and to recognise what happened in the history in order to look at the future, as Islah Jad has underlined:

“when I was meeting Israeli women academics I was surprised by their insistence not to talk about the history of the conflict; they just wanted to see the future. I was so astonished because how can you build a future without having a strong foundation for this future by clearing the past. [...] I felt that it was a waste of time these meetings for dialogue and for better understanding. It is no more about not understanding what is going on, but it is about not wanting to understand. So this is why I decided that I would not participate in this kind of meetings anymore. [...] I do not see any benefit from joint projects: I cannot leave Ramallah, we have checkpoints around us everywhere, we are like in a cage, if you want to go out of the cage, they have to give you a permit to do that. It is very important for any future reconciliation to admit what happened and how you can make the situation better”¹⁷⁷.

As explained above, women have attempted to put forward a shared political vision of interwoven everyday experiences in order to prevent further growing militarisation and violence. Nevertheless, it has been not enough to use the significance of the so-called 'politics of difference' and 'transversal politics' in improving the current reality. In fact, an excessive emphasis has been placed on idealising Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's alliances with the aim of overcoming ethno-national boundaries that have already destroyed entire communities through power relations and patriarchal institutions within the context of military occupation. In relation to this, Wafa Abdel Rahman has stated:

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Nabila Espanioly, Nazareth, September 15, 2010.

¹⁷⁶ A number of Palestinian women interviewees have agreed that in such joint initiatives it has been more difficult to maintain mutual trust especially after dramatic events, such as the 2008/9 war in Gaza.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Islah Jad, Birzeit University, Ramallah, November 2, 2009.

“joint projects mean normalizing the situation before the military occupation is over. If you do not reconcile, this whole process is ineffective. I have a lot of criticism about joint projects: when the oppressor is sitting next to the oppressed, you as oppressed feel that you are empowered. But it is not true because the Israeli Jewish narrative is still the dominant one. [...] The crucial idea is not to become friends, but to work together. It is necessary a political contribution and in particular a very strong women’s perspective that provides advanced analyses in order to end the conflict”¹⁷⁸.

In the present research analysis as well, the potential of such joint initiatives has appeared questionable, since many women have participated in the growth of mutual relationships founded on the hidden acceptance of asymmetric conditions. For some women political activists, shared groups and joint activities have even attempted to establish ‘normalised’ societies, and thus, this can be considered a further admission of the continuing military occupation. From a similar perspective, Judy Blanc has been quite pessimistic in her current vision concerning joint works:

“I believe that in this specific moment we cannot attempt to formulate a common program, what was done in the 1990s cannot be done now. We have to try different kinds of joint works, different directions and commitments. We have to learn again to talk to both sides, even though I do not think that dialogue will be the solution”¹⁷⁹.

Another analogous analysis has been proposed by one of the main Israeli Jewish founders of the *Jerusalem Link*, Molly Malekar, who has taken a completely unsuccessful view of her political movement after almost twenty years because of the supremacy of national and security issues as the only current priorities. She has sadly called to mind that:

“there was a period of time in the 1990s when we thought that Israeli and Palestinian women, as feminists and as belonging to the part of the society that has been oppressed more in each side, could bring their feminist efforts to struggle against each own militarism and nationalism. What we were trying to do was bringing women inside Israel to become closer to the political joint agenda. [...] But it did not happen: this is the fact. As Israeli we have to remember that the peace camp in Israel has not power at all, we have lost all our power bases. How do we translate our feminist principles into people’s life? This is something that we should start again thinking about. As women and

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Wafa Abdel Rahman, Ramallah, December 6, 2009.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Judy Blanc, Jerusalem, October 27, 2009.

feminists we should be able to convince the majority of Israelis and Palestinians that peace is not only about borders, but peace is about human life and quality of life, education, health system, democracy, in which we can have a powerful role”¹⁸⁰.

However, at the same time, Mariam Ikerawi has explained that:

“even though we have minimum of joint work and the situation on the ground is getting worse and worse, we do not give up on the *Jerusalem Link* project. We never broke completely reciprocal contacts, we never were out from the picture. I am proud of the Palestinian side of the *Jerusalem Link* because we do not work just to have an Israeli partnership, but we work upon political principles”¹⁸¹.

Additionally, Rula Salameh has maintained:

“we really need this partnership with Israeli women, but now it is not the good time. We have just frozen the relation, we did not cancel it. Within each community, we need to prepare a common agenda and to work in the field, trying to enlarge the circle that believes in these projects and ideas. I feel that we have the same necessity to change and do something together”¹⁸².

Along with such evidences and perspectives, the following chapters of the dissertation will aim at the core of what has emerged from such women’s initiatives, or better, what has not been realised by means of joint politics between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women. The lack of alternative political strategies, which could be effective not only among women’s activism, but also inside both societies, has not yet developed a common awareness concerning feasible future prospects beyond the ‘normalised’ *status quo* of military occupation. Palestinian-Israeli alliances have faced constant challenges, in the sense that building bridges needs firstly to develop a strong critical consciousness of the reality in which they have to take place, and then to go on to point towards the real material obstacles of such a situation of conflict and military occupation. Nevertheless, at the same time, there are women activists who have continued to take part in numerous joint initiatives, such as Edna Zaretsky-Toledano who has explained:

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Molly Malekar, Jerusalem, October 19, 2009.

¹⁸¹ Interview with Mariam Ikerawi, Beit Hanina, October 11, 2009.

¹⁸² Interview with Rula Salameh, Ramallah, October 21, 2010.

“since women are exposed in a very humanistic milieu to the stories, they may understand sorrow, fears, humiliations of the ‘Other’ and go beyond their own attitudes. And, in a parallel way, we need to acting together in order to stop the occupation. It is not easy, but we believe in the power of women to be attentive and to change the situation in opposition to a possible normalisation”¹⁸³.

¹⁸³ Interview with Edna Zaretsky-Toledano, Haifa, November 10, 2009.

CHAPTER SIX

DECONSTRUCTING ETHNO-NATIONAL IDENTITIES: WOMEN'S ACTIVISM WITHIN THE PARALYSIS OF MILITARY OCCUPATION

1. Fragmented Narratives within a Common Ground

In the previous chapters I have, through the consideration of examples of political initiatives and movements, examined the way in which conflicting Palestinian and Israeli Jewish narratives have tended towards exclusivity in terms of the views expressed regarding the enemy, and have embraced different perspectives on their shared historical experiences. Before the establishment of the state of Israel and the expulsion of Palestinians from their lands in 1948, the daily contacts between Palestinian Arabs and Jews, starting with women's joint initiatives, have challenged the political and territorial boundaries, and led to the involvement of each community in a variety of ways. In the most recent years, after decades during which there was an almost complete split between the two sides, and from the time of the first *Intifadah*, women as social and political actors have introduced some original voices to challenge the dominant interpretations and practices of the existing situation.

1.1. Going beyond Alternative Counter-Narratives?

By proving historical connections among Palestinian and Jewish narratives, and by stressing the need for justice, the leading intellectual Edward W. Said explicated what the real challenge will be:

“real principle and real justice have to be implemented before there can be true dialogue. Real dialogue is between equals, not between subordinate and dominant partners” (Said, 1996: 38).

Understanding, on the one hand, the essential contradictory perspectives and, on the other hand, the ethical dimensions of suffering, he underlined the need for

recognition in terms of “necessity rather than pure will” in order to describe a coexistence that would shed light upon differences between Jews and Palestinians, and also upon their common histories. From “each is the Other” (1974) to “I am a Jewish-Palestinian” (2000) Said constantly advocated the importance for Palestinians and Israeli Jews of overcoming the exclusivist concept of ethno-nationalism, seeing the possible alternatives either as the persistence of the conflict or as a peaceful resolution through a process of recognition and reconciliation. Pursuing a sincere belief in the inextricability of their narratives as the only future for the land of Palestine, Said held the view that:

“the essence of that vision is coexistence and sharing in ways that require an innovative, daring and theoretical willingness to get beyond the arid stalemate of assertion and rejection. Once the initial acknowledgment of the other as an equal is made, I believe the way forwards becomes not only possible but attractive” (Said, 1999).

During the 1990s, both in the West Bank and in Israel a number of women’s groups tried to tackle injustices directed against the weakest communities by addressing their internal as well as their relational differences. From within the Jewish state, these initiatives were joined particularly by Mizrahi and Palestinian women citizens of Israel. In this context, a few but nevertheless significant examples of joint projects have worked to shape a collective narrative which would help to overcome the endless discourse based on “who is more victim than the ‘Other’”. In such a way, mutual recognition has been considered as the *conditio sine qua non* with which to understand each historical drama and ethno-national identity (Pappé in Hilal and Pappé, 2007: 132-151).

In the current reality of continuing military occupation, power asymmetries between Palestinians and Israeli Jews have created further discriminations and have continued to represent the main challenge for the future development of a fair conflict resolution. In such a background, although the inextricable entanglement between Palestinians and Israeli Jews has increased, joint political activities have not achieved their original central goals. With regard to the debate concerning the necessity of establishing counter-narratives able to overcome the *status quo*, the deconstruction of multiple identities among and within women’s movements has still remained the key topic (especially within the most critical Israeli women’s feminist peace organisations).

Zionism, which has produced exclusivist politics through the patterns of national security and militarisation, has consolidated the ethnic inequalities and gender discriminations existing also inside the state of Israel, to a greater extent than within the occupied Palestinian territories.

Although debating about post-national narratives may be a difficult activity to promote, this could be essential for the setting up of political alternatives capable of going beyond opposing ethno-nationalisms. Since the gap between theoretical framework and fieldwork outcomes has become more and more visible, the main aim of the following paragraphs will suggest the interrelating of such critical women's political perspectives with their complex internal fragmentation. In this way, I will highlight the discontinuity that has characterised many of the political proposals put forward by women's feminist movements in Palestine/Israel, and will ask whether their everyday politics has actually changed during the period under examination: this question has represented a source of controversy within and among diverse instances of women's peace activism.

1.2. A 'War of Narratives'

As argued by most of the scholars reported throughout the thesis, in such a context, the discourse of ethno-national identity has always been at the core of the political debate, which has been characterised by controversial historical representations. Across the occupied Palestinian territories as well as in the Jewish state, the current wide-ranging impasse has fostered a deep sense of vulnerability, particularly among the more powerless segments of both societies, contributing to internal fractures and external interferences. In fact, the rise of Zionism and, in a parallel way, of Palestinian nationalism, has affected the implementation of partitions that have had the result of increasing boundaries, rather than encouraging awareness of historical and territorial commonalities between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. The exclusive way through which each national identity has been built up has not taken into account the multiplicity of overlapping narratives in play across the land of historic Palestine.

At the present time, on the Palestinian side, a number of factors, among them the ongoing disempowerment of the PLO's institutions, the physical and social fragmentation, and the continuing Israeli domination, have imposed the necessity of

rethinking the role of Palestinian civil society through their grassroots actions (Hilal, 2010). On the Israeli Jewish side, the society has been split by internal discriminations, stressing the heterogeneity of their ethno-national narrative identities, which are forced to represent a common but controversial frame within the Jewish state.

By discussing the implications of the segregation, fragmentation, and inequality that have been active over the period since 1948 throughout the land of Palestine, the process of construction of ethno-national identities has responded to the proliferation of cleavages among ethnic, historical, religious, and cultural collectivities. As defined by the scholar Gilbert Achcar with his expression ‘war of narratives’ (2010), any attempt to interpret entrenched narrative identities should be founded on full and mutual recognition of the past from diverse points of view. In terms of the protagonists rejecting and denying each other’s ethno-national identity, the main central issues of such exclusive narratives have been determined by understanding tragedies experienced by the opposing factions (the Holocaust and the *Nakba*), as well as their meanings in relation to the consequent effects on mutual interactions.

Such a question has been argued over particularly among Palestinian women, who have stressed that recognition of Israeli Jewish accountability over what happened to the Palestinian people during the *Nakba* represents a crucial step in order to reach a complete and egalitarian resolution process. For instance, Islah Jad has predicted a negative prospect for the future unless there is recognition and understanding of history:

“I do not see any sort of reconciliation without the recognition of the Palestinian rights. Since the beginning of the Zionist movement, and the creation of the state of Israel, Palestinians have suffered a lot and they have paid the heaviest price”¹⁸⁴.

In addition, although women’s political activism has played a part in the effort to learn and comprehend opposite narratives, a few women’s initiatives have been developed by denying this core principle of approach towards the ‘Other’.

On the other hand, on the basis of the ‘paradigm of parity’¹⁸⁵, Palestinian-Israeli relationships have been explained by the social psychologist Herbert Kelman as follows:

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Islah Jad, Birzeit University, Ramallah, November 2, 2009.

¹⁸⁵ See chapter five relating to the two opposites ‘paradigm of parity’ and ‘paradigm of oppressor-oppressed’.

“the exclusiveness of each group’s national identity is embedded in a pattern of *negative interdependence* of the two identities that greatly impeded the development of a transcendent identity. This negative interdependence of the two identities is further exacerbated by the fact that each side perceives the other as a *source of its own negative identity elements*” (Kelman, 1999: 588).

Additionally, Kelman has advocated a further key point in clarifying that “politically, the *positive interdependence* of the two identities requires a solution that allows each people to assert its national identity without negating the identity of the other” (1999: 598). However, from this approach, the recognition of the ‘Other’ has remained unfulfilled, pending the exploration of further alternative views.

In reality, women’s frames have from both sides turned into fragile and fragmented connections that have weakened their roles and proposals, mostly due to the Israeli power network that has created the so-called ‘facts on the ground’¹⁸⁶ (comprising expropriations of Palestinian land in order to build up illegal settlements within the Palestinian territories). Furthermore, Palestinian women have faced the intra-national conflict between *al-Fatah* and *Hamas*: many Palestinian women’s organisations have taken on their own responsibility, promoting the need to put an end to such an ongoing internal struggle. Naila Ayesh states:

“as women, our aim is to highlight the importance to reunite the political factions for national purposes, above all the improvement of the entire Palestinian society. We should be united against the occupation and not divided between ourselves”¹⁸⁷.

Mariam Ikermai has also stressed the divided Palestinian context:

“the Palestinians are scattered: Jerusalem is on its own, the West Bank is on its own, Gaza is on its own, and then you have the Palestinians inside the 1948 area and the Palestinians of the Diaspora, the refugees. [...] There is a lot of work that we have to do inside ourselves as Palestinians. I believe that we have to work for our Palestinian unity before thinking about any occupation: this is our

¹⁸⁶ The anthropologist and political activist Jeff Halper has defined the Israeli strategy against Palestinians using the expression of ‘matrix of control’. This has aimed to “(1) allow Israel to control every aspect of Palestinian life in the occupied territories, while (2) lowering Israel’s military profile so as to give the impression that what Palestinians refer to as occupation is merely proper administration, and (3) that Israel’s military repression is merely self-defence against an aggressive Palestinian people endeavouring to expel it, yet (4) carving out just enough space in the form of dis-connected enclaves to establish a dependent Palestinian mini-state that will relieve Israel of the Palestinian population while (5) forcing the Palestinians to despair of ever achieving a viable and truly sovereign state and thereby accept any settlement offered by Israel” (Halper, 2004).

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Naila Ayesh, Ramallah, October 20, 2009.

priority. Otherwise we are doing exactly in accordance with the Israeli schemes”¹⁸⁸.

On the other hand, it is necessary to bear in mind the profound Israeli internal divisions, as already described in chapter four in relation to the ‘politics of difference’ among Israeli women activists (especially Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, and Palestinians). Included in this consideration, the analysis concerning the Israeli Jewish narrative identity has had to deal with two additional features, ethnic identity (Ashkenazi or Mizrahi) and national identity (Jewish or Israeli). From such a standpoint, all the so-called ‘Others’ within the Israeli society, starting with Palestinian citizens of Israel and Mizrahi Jews as well as the most recent migrant workers, have assumed a minority status. In connection with potential post-national frameworks, internal divisions have questioned the meaning of major implications towards the complexity of the ethno-national, cultural, and religious identities existing in Israel. Furthermore, the political platform of a single state for all citizens has become one of the most salient subjects to be argued, in particular with the Palestinian Arab minority, which has been historically considered as second-class citizenship.

2. Deconstructing Ethno-Nationalism: Possible Prospects in Palestine/Israel

In reality, feasible examples of post-nationalism have not yet taken place within the current political order, although they have profoundly questioned ethno-national identities in order to show failures and obstacles linked to the nation-state system. Some critics have argued that:

“the claim that the architects of a post-national future can learn from the lessons and techniques of their nationalist predecessors is ultimately lacking in persuasive power because its proponents are unable to say with any confidence or precision which lessons or techniques are relevant, how they are supposed to perform their function and what other factors are likely to contribute to their failure or their success” (Harty and Murphy, 2005: 154).

For this reason, in this paragraph I will focus more on the ways through which Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women have attempted to deconstruct their ethno-national

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Mariam Ikerawi, Beit Hanina, October 11, 2009.

status quo, rather than emphasising the theoretical framework on the post-national vision.

2.1. *Post-Nationalism as an (Un)Feasible Challenge*

Reflecting on nationalism and its meaning in the current reality, although the contemporary proliferation of ethno-national conflicts has strongly increased, in a parallel way a further debate concerning the status of nation-states and their future demise has also been ongoing in Palestine/Israel. Constant struggles among challenging narratives have determined how “nationalist ideologies and movements reject the constitutive ‘otherness’ at the source of all culture” (Benhabib, 2002: 8). In this sense, the basic principle of recognising¹⁸⁹ diverse individuals and groups in terms of their being components of a wider collective narrative identity has continued to be a difficult issue within the approach to ethno-national pluralities. In attempting to move the nationalist discourse that divides the world into the dichotomy of ‘we’ and ‘Other(s)’ further on, the deconstruction of narrative identities begins to present itself as extremely fluid and multiform.

From a different perspective but with a significant relevance for this discussion, another feminist theorist, Nancy Fraser, has provided a critique to the recognition paradigm, suggesting instead the concept of redistribution in order to struggle against injustice and discriminations (Fraser, 2000). Along with theories of conflict resolution and transformation, the feminist approach used by Fraser can also be included within the assumption that the achievement of justice requires both recognition and redistribution. Furthermore, by putting forward a politics of recognition that might work with a politics of redistribution, Fraser has embraced a deconstructive view of subjectivity, as one of the main features of critical feminist theories and their emphasis on the issues of identity and difference. In such a view, the deconstruction of unequal power relationships has represented a core linking both feminist discourses and critical conflict resolution approaches, as I have tried to show throughout this thesis.

¹⁸⁹ What has been defined as the politics of recognition has represented one of the main cores of the current political philosophy, especially in relation to the multiculturalism issue. Such a definition has been firstly introduced by the philosopher Charles Taylor in his renowned essay *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (1992).

In a parallel direction, as already suggested by the scholar Arjun Appadurai (1993), thinking beyond nations has become necessary to face up to the conceptual framework of nation-states that seem to be no longer able to represent identity politics within the worldwide reality, especially in conflict and post-conflict situations. Considering common grounds of plurality and fragmentation of narrative identities, such a discourse can represent an alternative analytical lens through which it is possible to call into question conventional concepts and political strategies in relation to both the end of military occupation in the Palestinian territories and the subsequent conflict resolution. Although the Palestinian-Israeli context is founded on the paradigm of settler colonialism (as I have initially explained in chapter one), and focusing on a reality of stateless nation experienced by the Palestinian people, this debate has also started to become active among a few of the intellectual and political groups that have suggested viable prospects for a just solution of the conflict.

Based mostly on such remarks, post-nationalist challenges have tried to draw an alternative scenario through which the principles of national self-determination and sovereignty have been questioned¹⁹⁰. As parallel pathways, post-national theories have assumed different conceptual grounds: analysing a variety of frames that have ranged from cultural to functional issues, post-nationalism has raised new forms of narrative identity and citizenship practices. In this way, the academic Homi Bhabha has suggested that the central problem is not simply the ‘self-hood’ of each nation in opposition to the challenging ‘Others’, but he has called attention to ethno-national splits from within and their internal heterogeneity (Bhabha, 1994: 199-244).

2.2. *Thinking beyond Ethno-Nationalisms among Women Activists*

After the failure of the Oslo Accords, the uprising of the second *Intifadah*, and the uncertain demise of the historic solution of ‘two states for two peoples’, more and more of the intellectuals, academics, and political activists of both sides have revived the discussion about possible political alternatives in the land of Palestine/Israel. From Edward Said to Ilan Pappé, Azmi Bishara, Tanya Reinhart, Amira Hass, Ali Abunimah,

¹⁹⁰ Since the XVIII century, the earliest notions of post-nationalism and cosmopolitanism have represented the major questions studied by the liberal political theory, looking back to Immanuel Kant, and later on, to John Stuart Mill, as well as, on the other hand, by communist thought from Karl Marx to Rosa Luxemburg.

Oren Yiftachel, Virginia Tilley, Karma Nabulsi, Uri Davis, Jamil Hilal, and Jeff Halper: all of them, though working from different perspectives, have agreed on the unfeasibility of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state due to the Israeli policy of dividing the geographical reality which should be part of the future Palestinian entity into many small pieces (such as settlements, cantons and areas separated by barriers).

By considering particularly the establishment of a single common state (in the two main versions of ‘bi-nationalism’¹⁹¹ and ‘one, democratic and secular state’¹⁹²), such a proposal has been developed into the only option still viable in which both populations could live with equal rights as equal citizens. From being regarded as a threat to the mainstream policy, it has been seen as playing a reliable role in allowing a fair resolution of the conflict between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. Although such prospects have not explicitly been taken up either in the Palestinian or in the Israeli institutional agenda, their interpretations and models have been envisioned within grassroots activism. In effect, the possibility of a single state has been initially envisaged because of the despair of a real Palestinian independence, and, later on, it has been favoured by those who have sustained the necessity of going beyond ethno-national boundaries and calling for one joint socio-political and economic entity in the land of historic Palestine.

Since the fragmented geography of the Palestinian territories has excluded the feasibility of establishing an independent state, other political directions have been developed. Among the women I interviewed during my fieldwork, different voices have expressed controversial opinions about the attempt to construct a future Israeli-Palestinian bridging reality. In this context, Wafa Abdel Rahman has articulated her perplexity by underlining that:

“I am not optimistic that this conflict will have an end soon. I am not even certain that the ‘two-state solution’ is the solution to the conflict. I am building my pessimism on what is going on, the ‘facts on the ground’. Israel is going to

¹⁹¹ As suggested by Susan Hattis Rolef’s in-depth analysis concerning the bi-national idea in Mandatory times, it should involve “a system of government in which the two nations concerned are viewed as the primary components, or state-forming elements of the state, where the status of neither depends on the good will or generosity of the other, and the government and state institutions are shared by the two, not necessarily in proportion to their respective numerical strength but as a fundamental principle of the system” (Hattis Rolef, 1974).

¹⁹² In theory, the idea of a single state with equal rights for both Israeli Jews and Palestinians should put an end to the main difficult arguments, such as the Israeli illegal settlements built on the Palestinian territories, the Palestinian refugees issue, and the status of Jerusalem (concerning the ‘one-state’ solution, see in particular Abunimah, 2006, and Tilley, 2005). Nevertheless, the current reality does not seem to go forward such a direction, rather injustices and discriminations have prevailed so far.

destroy the option of the ‘two-state solution’. But the problem is that the alternatives are neither the ‘bi-national state’ nor the ‘one state’: the dominant feeling is that you do not really have a solution and you do not see a future coming soon”¹⁹³.

This expression of powerlessness is typical of the view which has prevailed through all Palestinian women’s experiences, questioning which kind of resolution would be achievable at the current *status quo* of ongoing expansion of settlements and boundaries within the occupied Palestinian territories. Since the ‘two-state solution’ has not been implemented, many women have called for new thinking about further prospects, although the Israeli prevailing ‘apartheid’ has succeeded in separating Israeli Jews and Palestinians in such a way as to make any alternative political system prone to collapse.

Nonetheless, whilst still searching for a feasible conflict resolution, Huda al-Imam has affirmed her belief in:

“open borders, equality, and in general in the ‘one-state solution’. Anyway I know that many people think that before it is necessary a Palestinian state: I do not agree with them. I could not accept a Palestinian state like a ‘Bantustan state’. What we need is our freedom, starting with freedom of movement, not to be worried to be stopped at the checkpoints or to pass through the Wall”¹⁹⁴.

In this way, the pursuit of a political change in the current balance of power, which has mainly challenged the core of Israeli society, has the object of continuing to struggle against ethno-national, class and gender discriminations. A desire for achieving human dignity and equality has been demanded by the majority of women interviewees, who have conveyed feelings of scepticism regarding their own internal national prospects as well as the spread of injustice among oppressed minorities.

The political scientist Ilana Kaufman has addressed the meaning of state in Israel, and has distinguished three theoretical models of ‘ethnic state’, ‘multination state’ and ‘civic nation state’:

“the probability that Israel in the near future will transform from a Jewish state to a civic nation state in which Jews and Arabs will share a national identity is low. [...] But in the more distant future, it is possible to foresee the change of the Israeli state to a multicultural civic nation state model. [...] If the discourse

¹⁹³ Interview with Wafa Abdel Rahman, Ramallah, December 6, 2009.

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Huda al-Imam, East Jerusalem, September 20, 2010.

on individual rights grows stronger, and informal autonomous communities (such as separate neighbourhoods for ultra-Orthodox, religious and secular Jews, and for secular and religious Arabs) grow further apart, the demand for an overall change of the relationship between the state and the citizens will become stronger” (Kaufman in Bligh, 2003: 245).

From such viewpoints, the recognition of diversities within and between communities has begun to be considered as a theoretical foundation for a number of studies regarding the multiple collectivities that exist within the state of Israel. Several analyses in relation to ‘civic nationalism’ have suggested that this approach is relatively in favour of women, in the sense that it may provide more freedom and access to both private and public spheres (Cockburn, 2007: 197).

As well as looking towards future conflict resolution, the choice of reframing long-term strategies has represented a common vision among those women interviewees who have been examining the possibilities available for resisting current boundaries and oppressions. Whilst accepting that the making of ethno-national issues still represents an ongoing process, the search for other narratives has been continuously pursued within different contexts. In a similar framework, Erella Shadmi has admitted that:

“even if I do not support nationalism, I think both Jews and Palestinians are unable to throw away their nationalism because it is so important to their feelings, to their histories. We need to explore different collectivities, within Palestinians as well as Israelis. I can see the state organised around two state collectivities and each collectivity is also built of different communities with a certain kind of autonomy, and everyone can choose where living. We have to build up a balance between different communities that can guarantee access to all people everywhere. [...] It will take time, but we need to think about communities, and the balance among them, it may change everything. We need solidarity to move from a state system to a community system”¹⁹⁵.

In such a way, both Palestinian and Jewish citizens could move from one community to another, either inside their own ethno-national frame or between opposite national communities, by developing a fair balance among natural resources, political and social conditions, cultural and religious traditions. In the recognition of the present reality and going beyond conventional structures, this political proposal is intended to develop alternative kinds of inter-communal relationships which are able to move away from the ethno-nationalist paradigm. As a consequence, dynamic relations among

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Erella Shadmi, Haifa, September 14, 2010.

women have underlined the importance of narrative identities produced by individual histories as well as social connections. A significant number of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women political activists have focused their actions on subjective experiences of being members of their collectivities, but, at the same time, they have attempted to take part in a wider discourse beyond ethno-national divisions. The majority of my interviewees have pointed out how the way of keeping their own ethno-national identity may shift over time and space through different shared struggles as well as through mutual cooperation.

Moving within the territory of feminist critical approaches, in many cases women's feminist organisations have accepted the opportunity to be publicly recognised and legitimised through such ethno-national paradigms. According to the foremost feminist literature, different ways of understanding ethno-nationalism have been embodied in the feminist frame, given that the centrality of national and self-determination issues has been integrated in all levels of the society. Moreover, several women activists from both sides have expressed disapproval of their civil societies, and also of a number of women's organisations, since such movements have been unable to neutralise the consequences of military occupation, for the reason that they have put more weight on the social agenda, rather than on future political plans. This argument has been at the centre of many interviews I conducted, mostly in regard to what feasible proposals could be advocated to overcome the current impasse.

On the other hand, by recognising what has been described as the 'politics of difference'¹⁹⁶, women's narratives have expressed their own perspectives towards the irreversible contemporary process of intertwined communities, cultures, and socio-political transformations. The issue of difference among identities has been recognised and presented as the core feature within their political alternatives, in order to overcome ethno-nationalist challenges both at the academic and grassroots level. Starting especially with 'bottom up' political experiences, they have tried to legitimise the pluralism of identities within collective and individual discourses. This controversial debate has been referred to in detail in chapter four, in terms of the heterogeneity within the Israeli women's movement.

¹⁹⁶ For more details, see chapter two.

In spite of this complex picture, several women I interviewed seemed to be more pessimistic. These have included some historic feminist activists like Edna Zaretsky-Toledano, who has confessed:

“hatred and fear are very bad advisors; they are guidelines of both societies. Both peoples have become more nationalist and more fundamentalist. When nationalism fails to bring victory or solution, the religion comes. [...] We are in a very vicious circle. Not only it is about the occupation but also its implications, such as the indifference to human values, to human life”¹⁹⁷.

Taking into consideration an analogous perspective, Molly Malekar has questioned her own historic experience inside the Israeli women’s peace movement. In her opinion, women’s political effort has been rather ineffective since:

“we thought we achieved the potential to bring women from both sides regardless of their national affiliations. It did not succeed. [...] In the past we have been marginalised as leftist movement, but on the other hand nowadays what we have tried to promote for the last twenty-five, thirty years, has somehow entered the mainstream. In this sense the majority of people have accepted the ‘two-state solution’, but the facts on the ground have made such a resolution irreversible”¹⁹⁸.

As regards the present political scenario, most of the women activists as well as the intellectuals I met have realised the necessity of a new theoretical debate which is able to go beyond the rhetorical standpoints, although they have recognised the general difficulty and frustration of reaching a common voice which could lead towards a joint future. From their analytical viewpoints along with their personal experiences, this required starting point could attempt to link theory and practice, and, according to the majority of women political activists I interviewed (both Israeli Jews and Palestinians), the diversity of narrative identities, including those within peace organisations, would need to be recognised in order to provide a further chance to face up to the paralysis that has dominated the current agenda of mainstream peace activism in Palestine/Israel until the recent time.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Edna Zaretsky-Toledano, Haifa, November 10, 2009.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Molly Malekar, Jerusalem, October 19, 2009.

2.3. *Overcoming Zionism as a Feminist Position for Conflict Resolution*¹⁹⁹

With regard to post-national features, the feminist critique directed towards Zionism has reflected one of the main challenges of the Jewish state on the academic and political stage. In connection with such a paradigm and the wider context of political peace activism, a significant number of prominent Palestinian and Israeli Jewish scholars have required the reconceptualising and redefining of the supremacy of the Zionist ideology within the Israeli ethno-national system. As has been predicted first by the well-known political scientist and former Deputy Major of Jerusalem Meron Benvenisti, the process towards the building up of a single state between Israeli Jews and Palestinians has become inevitable (Benvenisti, 2003 and 2010).

The question related to the existence of the state of Israel founded on the Zionist ideal, in terms of ethno-nationalist narrative as well as community of faith, has continued to be controversial. However, the internal criticism of a minority of Jewish activists has attempted to overcome the denial of the 'Other' story, and specifically, to bridge the gap between the construction of the Zionist narrative and the Palestinian resistance struggle for nationhood. In fact, in an ethno-nationalist context rooted on hostility and destruction against the other side's narrative, the Zionist mainstream has increased its own collective identity not only from within, but also as a counter-identity directed towards the opposite people, the Palestinian Arabs.

From the initial stage of the establishment of the Zionist movement at the end of the XIX century, and in consequence of the social and demographic changes due to Jewish mass immigration (both from Europe and Arab countries), the invention of the Israeli national identity, named 'Israeliness' by the sociologist Baruch Kimmerling (2001), completely transformed the internal balance of power towards native Palestinian Arabs. The impact of Zionism and its resultant transformation into an exclusivist Jewish state incited physical and symbolic violence by enforcing the displacement and dismantlement of the Palestinian people.

Although several Jewish political dissenters in opposition to Zionism have attempted to express criticism since the initial steps of the state of Israel, the development of the Zionist paradigm has inscribed a completely separate system. Alternative solutions of cohabitation and cooperation between Jews and Palestinian

¹⁹⁹ In this sub-paragraph I will include some concepts that I have already explained more fully at the end of chapter four concerning the Israeli Jewish women's internal debate on Zionism.

Arabs have not achieved widely accepted support, while controversial policies have increased Zionist expressions of ethno-nationalism. Among them, since the end of the 1980s, a number of Israeli Jewish scholars, the so-called post-Zionists²⁰⁰, have started to doubt the main Zionist historical narrative, and in particular the way through which Israeli academics have controlled their internal public consciousness by collaborating with Zionist leaderships. As introduced by one of the main theorists of the post-Zionist debate, Laurence Silberstein, the term ‘post-Zionism’, although lacking a generally agreed fixed definition, has been:

“applied to a current set of critical positions that problematise Zionist discourse, and the historical narratives and social and cultural representations that it produced. The growing use of the term post-Zionism is indicative of an increasing sense among many Israelis that the maps of meaning provided by Zionism are simply no longer adequate. To critics and detractors, post-Zionism presents a challenge to the basic principles and values of Zionism” (Silberstein, 1999: 2).

Another view worthy of note has been proposed by the feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis, maintaining that:

“one can distinguish three major uses of the term ‘post-Zionism’: one relating to specific methodological, analytical and normative approaches in the Israeli social sciences, especially history and sociology; one identifying as such specific political trends and forces within contemporary Israel; and one that identifies a particular period/project of the Israeli polity/society as a whole as post-Zionists” (Yuval-Davis in Nimni, 2003: 183).

In various ways, the concept of post-Zionism has played a significant role in the thinking of Israeli academia, particularly in the social sciences, producing critical contributions in relation to the current social and political reality of the state of Israel. Over the past twenty years, the ‘New Historians’²⁰¹ have attempted to revise the Israeli historiography and to deconstruct the Zionist perspective by going beyond conventional narratives. This new discourse has given rise to a number of controversies, not least because of the consequent effect of questioning the historical origin of the Jewish state, along with the heterogeneity of the Israeli collective national identity. In spite of these

²⁰⁰ On the one hand, post-Zionist scholars have represented the main challenge to the traditional Zionism from the leftist side, on the other hand neo-Zionists coming from the rightist and religious parties have supported the most deprived components of the Jewish society in order to reinforce the establishment of their ethno-national identity.

²⁰¹ See note 22 in chapter one.

contributions from academia, the current era has nevertheless continued to perpetuate the unbalanced and oppressive policies acting between Palestinians and Israeli Jews without effectively contesting the basic system of Israeli society²⁰² (Silberstein, 1999: 123).

In relation to such a discourse, since the beginning of its history the Zionist narrative has tried to involve women in Israeli nation-building, and later on in the development of the Jewish state, as documented in the collective volume edited by Deborah Bernstein, entitled *Pioneers and Homemakers* (1992). In fact, this ethno-national process has mostly taken for granted gendered power hierarchies, including women as mothers of the growing nation-state²⁰³ within the construction of the Zionist hegemony. However, within such a nationalist panorama, in various circumstances women's voices belonging to different backgrounds have challenged the male dominated system in order to rise above the traditional separation between private and public spheres.

Looking more deeply into the historical experiences of the Israeli Jewish women's movements and their connection with Zionist principles, since the 1980s a significant number of participating women, though still a minority, have condemned the militarism and patriarchy of the Zionist mainstream. As described by the scholar Hanna Herzog:

“feminism's stance produces to a critique of the dominant male Zionist discourse, and seeks to re-examine national history and aspirations, focusing on controlling and oppressive relationships: as such, it is situated at the heart of post-Zionist discourse and is an integral part of it. [...] Post-Zionist feminist discourse challenges the universalistic perception of woman, including the Zionist woman, and an effort is being made to uncover the various positionings of women and their interpretations of reality: Mizrahi women, national religious, ultra-orthodox, secular, single-parent, lesbian, poor, bourgeois, Palestinian and so forth” (Herzog in Nimni, 2003: 161).

Nevertheless, as underlined throughout the whole of this research, most of the Israeli Jewish women peace activists have been driven by mainstream overviews and conventional political perspectives, while, in contrast, a small but significant number of them have produced critical reflections on the meaning of the Jewish state. Looking at

²⁰² From this perspective, post-Zionism has been accused of taking part in the process of ‘normalisation’ of the *status quo*, instead of resisting and opposing the Zionist discourse.

²⁰³ For more about the role of Zionist national narrative within the Israeli Jewish women's history, see chapter four.

possible challenges towards the ‘original sin’²⁰⁴ that has continued to be developed since 1948, the internal Israeli Jewish criticism has been primarily based on the thinking that Zionism is first of all ‘bad for Jews’. In spite of this, numerous post-Zionists, whilst opposing some Israeli policies, have remained engaged within the main ethno-national structures of power. Because of this limitation, the current instances of women’s activism, including activities relating to the peace movement within Israeli Jewish society and among Jews throughout the world, have not demonstrated that it is able either to conduct relevant actions to break the Israeli internal discriminatory state-system, or to improve the reality on the ground by calling for equal human rights and fair conditions of life for Palestinians.

An additional critique levelled towards such post-Zionist analyses has concerned the way in which most of them have ignored the element of the Jewish collectivity coming from Arab countries, as being a crucial component of the Jewish nation. Above all, according to the Mizrahi narrative identity, a number of intellectuals, as well as activists, have advocated the reconsideration of the role of the Mizrahi people inside Israel. By deploying an alternative conceptual frame, the connection between Zionism (along with its critical standpoints) and the Mizrahi narrative needs to be reformulated in a dialectic process.

Among those intellectuals who have started such a critique, the scholar Ella Shohat has founded one of the main questions of her research on the ambivalent positioning of the Mizrahi population within the Jewish state. In particular, she has sought to emphasise the national Jewish framework in which discriminations and power unbalances have continued to prevail between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi (in addition, of course, to the unbalance associated with identity denial directed towards Palestinians). From her point of view, Shohat illustrated the usefulness of stressing the multiplicity of experiences in contrast to the exclusive Zionist vision in play inside Israel. Both in terms of academic debate and as an internal crisis within Israeli society, the most

²⁰⁴ By using this expression, it has been explained why Zionist mainstream has been constructed on the historical Jewish suffering, and in particular on the consequences and myths of the Holocaust (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992: 160-182). A very critical analysis about such a subject has been proposed by the theologian Marc Ellis, who has stated that “the Holocaust itself has become a Jewish archetype, and this, too, is a reference point for the future. However, the Holocaust archetype is as ambiguous as it is powerful” (2002: 23), and questioned “can the memory of suffering inflicted on Jews one day come to terms with a suffering that Jews have inflicted on Palestinians? And could that dawning realization of the difficult struggle for survival and the loss of innocence propel the Jewish people into a search for life beyond being victim or an oppressor?” (2002: 26). Ellis has attempted to answer, explaining that “such a recovery of memory can limit the bifurcation which is so much a part of Jewish life. It may also lead to a reconciliation with the ‘enemy’ which often as not portends a reconciliation with one’s self” (2002: 26).

important task assumed by post-Zionist positions should be to attempt to transcend the traditional Zionist paradigm (Shohat, 1988).

In light of this analysis, the possibility of dismantling Zionism has appeared extremely complicated since it has been powerfully institutionalised in Israeli history. Nonetheless, an alternative political platform to the Zionist ideology has been not completely excluded by a minority of activists within the peace movement in Israel. In detail, I have sought to show this through my reports of the interviews included in the last paragraph of chapter four, concerning the current debate among Israeli Jewish women activists on problematising the Zionist narrative.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WOMEN'S ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES: POLITICAL CRITICISM AND JOINT ACTIONS

1. Women's Counter-Narratives among Palestinians and Israeli Jews

Awareness of both the political and social forms of discrimination encountered by women within their own societies as well as when participating in different kinds of political activism has increased in the last twenty years. As has been delineated throughout this dissertation, although women's feminist perspectives have become more visible, particularly in grassroots organisations, on the other hand, their politics has been limited by the prevalence of gendered and class inequalities as well as by the growth of political and religious fundamentalisms. In deep-seated nationalist and militaristic backgrounds, women's activism has been internalised as one of the main counter-narratives operating against violence and oppression towards the weakest social actors, both within the Jewish state and in the Palestinian territories under military occupation. At the end of the previous chapters I have assumed the main theoretical points of the Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's feminist struggle as directed towards the end of military occupation and, as a consequence, questioning dominant ethno-national narratives, whilst in the following chapter I will describe the major actions taken by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women activists in pressing for alternative political change.

1.1. Women's Activism Overcoming Ethno-National Narrative Identities

Since the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been characterised by opposing violent narratives (starting with the collective national identities and reciprocal victimization, as well as the delegitimisation of the 'Other'), women's feminist initiatives have attempted to deconstruct ethno-nationalist paradigms. By taking into account the plurality of such narratives, a number of women's organisations, which have been examined in the previous chapters, have developed feasible political pathways to be followed. Although

their foremost proposals of mutual understanding and cooperation have had a limited influence on the general public of both societies, they have reflected a hope for sharing the narratives that are in conflict with each other. A similar project has aspired to create alternative academic discussions and political actions that may be helpful in order to bridge the narratives existing in the land of Palestine/Israel. In connection with the critical discourse founded on dialogical relations within and among opposite ethno-nationalisms, women's feminist challenge has sought to go beyond theory, to the translation of theory into political achievement.

In this way, it has become possible to assume the basic principles related in particular to non-Western women's experiences:

“a) the importance of looking critically at activist practices and of theorizing them as part of feminist agendas; b) the awareness that every practice is undergirded by some kind of theory, philosophy, worldview, or discursive grid - even when the practitioners claim not to have a theory; c) the fact that theorizing and theories are not a Western monopoly, a view that would inscribe in reverse a colonialist vision of the ‘West’ as theoretical mind and the ‘non-West’ as unreflecting body; d) that ‘Third World’ women and ‘women of color’ have themselves contributed to theorizing not only by writing theory per se, but also through their own, multi-axis thinking and activism, which has challenged multiple hegemonic discourses” (Shohat, 2006: 8).

Following this relevant approach, in Palestine/Israel as well, the proposal of alternative narrative identities shaped by women activists has started to emerge, deconstructing the nationalist rhetoric within each side, along with starting the rebuilding of such frames through individual and collective lenses. Women may now have the possibility of looking beyond ethno-nationalist boundaries, towards involvement in the different but equally significant narratives which can be seen from a wider viewpoint (Yuval-Davis and Werbner, 1999).

Through their demand for a shared political space, women have attempted to react to problems encountered within their respective communities, such as by confronting joint struggles and controversial dissent from within. In crossing political and geographic borders, an increasing number of women's initiatives have questioned their national aspirations in a struggle with their own internal consensus, which has still continued to largely reject any alternative option in favour of retaining conventional schemes. As described by the following moving words, the feminist scholar Ayala Emmett has written:

“the women’s joint struggle is nevertheless illuminating, because the struggle in which they engaged belongs to their respective nations, which have been locked together in a violent relationship for so long. The women’s struggles and dilemmas mirror what was - and will continue to be - a difficult, risky, and unpredictable process, yet the women, who are firmly anchored in their respective communities, were adamant in their determination to forge a transnational territory in which they could act together” (Emmett, 2003: 46).

From this point of view, even though women’s struggles have mostly represented minorities from within their communities²⁰⁵, as a consequence of their political initiatives they have implemented new conceptions concerning the paradigm of nation-state and their ethno-national identities.

1.2. An Unresolved Gap of Split Realities

At the same time, such a politics cannot ignore the unequal power-relations experienced by women in their different everyday lives: as has been shown through the analysis of the case study on the *Jerusalem Link*, this reality has been transformed into a sort of paradox, especially within Palestinian-Israeli women’s joint projects. In view of negotiating narratives constructed on hate and fear, the gap between the rhetoric of stressing ‘difference’ and the small degree of influence of such initiatives has led to a social-political marginality for women’s minority groups within both the Israeli women’s feminist peace movement and Palestinian women’s activism. In spite of their initial criticism of mainstream ethno-national narratives, the debate around post-national alternatives has remained in the background of the majority of women’s actions, and of their theoretical proposals. Indeed, such perspectives could be understood as diverse contributions helping to reproblematised the nature of women’s agency within conflicting ethno-nationalist frames and in relation to post-national approaches.

Intersecting parallel but often contrasting ethno-national identities, a common thread running through women’s narratives has implicated relationships founded on imbalances of both power and privileges. The emphasis on the meaning of identity as a

²⁰⁵ The issue related to women from minority communities has emerged in a more intense way in the Israeli society, in particular among Palestinians and Mizrahi Jews, who have been subjugated and discriminated against by the Ashkenazi Jewish elite. In many cases, disparity between ethno-nationality and citizenship has been expressed by women’s life histories, creating asymmetrical positions inside the Jewish state.

continuous interaction has been central in suggesting the content of women's challenges not only towards the opposite side, but also within their own societies. From their feminist political activism and their scholarship, women's attempts at crossing ethnic, national and class boundaries have contributed to the core of each woman's experience. If processes of universal solidarity have only represented Palestinian and Israeli women's reality in a few circumstances, on the other hand, it is certain that women activists have tried to make possible a new way of viewing political alternatives to the current conflict using similar discourses.

Adopting such a frame, the feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty has emphasised that:

“we take ourselves seriously only when we go ‘beyond’ ourselves, valuing not just the plurality of differences among us but also the massive presence of the Difference that our recent planetary history has installed. This ‘Difference’ is what we see only through the lenses of our present moment, our present struggles” (Mohanty, 2003: 119).

Applying this critical challenge to the *status quo* of women's movements in Israel and in the West Bank, women from both sides have sought to gain recognition for the discourse founded on their internal differences in order to, at least, reconcile cross-national identities. In relation to what has been called ‘intersectionality’, and by examining the way through which ethnicity, nationality, and class interact inside each narrative identity, in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories women political activists have been positioned individually and collectively within such identity constructions. The multifaceted gap between women's activism and feminist knowledge has demonstrated the fact that problematic issues related to ethno-national identities have continued to dominate the foremost theoretical contributions, but not yet to dominate the reality on the ground.

1.3. Women's Political Struggle and the Present Impasse

As highlighted by a number of examples (especially the most well-known joint project between Eastern and Western Jerusalemite women - *Jerusalem Link*), after October 2000 the political ground changed and the progress of women's joint

experiments started to be interrupted. This decline has been recognised as a complex political failure to transform talks into actions that could manage equality, inclusion and solidarity across women activists in conflict areas, and take this progress further than the general situation existing within their whole societies. After the highest peak of joint initiatives during the 1990s, when Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women declared their resolve to refuse their mutual enmity towards the 'Other', women's political activism has entered the current impasse. A time of crisis seems to go on bringing to the surface political and religious fundamentalisms from most of the communities inside Palestine/Israel, instead of giving voice to people who are aware of the only feasible possibility, that of living side by side.

On the one hand, the partial balance among fragmented identities and mutual interactions that has been achieved by such a political activism within Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's organisations has significantly questioned the theoretical level. On the other hand, it has been problematic to deal with the practical influence of changing the reality significantly in the direction of a just conflict resolution. In this sense, political challenges (and, above all, examples of women's activism) that have tried to suggest alternative solutions for ending the conflict and going beyond ethno-national cleavages must not be reduced to the issue related to the concept of coexistence²⁰⁶. In fact, within the Palestinian women's movement many interviewees have expressed substantial criticism of the hypocritical use of such a term, especially at the formal level through which the equidistance paradigm between 'occupier' and 'occupied' has prevailed. In this way, the majority of Palestinian women have not focused on such subjects, since they believe that the first necessary step should be to recognise what happened in the past and has continued until the present time, starting from the plight of the Palestinian refugees, along with the persistence of injustice and exploitation against Palestinians.

Although inside Israel a just coexistence between Jews and Palestinians has been the leitmotiv of a significant number of women's joint initiatives since the early 1990s, a widespread deterioration of the current situation has generated a vicious circle of violence as well as indifference towards the 'Other'. In dealing with future alternatives without considering one of the primary rights still in question for the Palestinian people, that is their existence both as individuals and as a collectivity, the political result of

²⁰⁶ A theoretical discussion about definitions and possible implications of coexistence has been introduced in the beginning of chapter five.

women's cooperation will continue to be a fruitless copy of the mainstream model. In addition, most of my Israeli women interviewees have also expressed the view that speaking about coexistence has been an illusion or a joke, since the main experiences of joint projects have operated between the 'occupied' and the 'occupier', and not between two equal sides.

In such a way, the expression of coexistence has also been questioned, given that "you coexist with people you do not care very deeply about, not with people you like. I do not coexist with my children or spouse or real friends. We exist together; we enjoy each other and our relationships"²⁰⁷. Deliberating on what kind of coexistence may be supported within unequal and discriminatory interactions has become meaningless, unless there can be progress towards creating equal structures of power relations among all people. In fact, as Molly Malekar has stated:

"I am afraid that we are in a stage that we firstly have to think about existence. People from both sides are emotionally and psychologically in the stage of mind that the first thing is existence: existence not only physically but also as communities. This is why when people are in the stage of trying to rescue their existence, there is a very little space in their hearts and minds for 'co-existence'"²⁰⁸.

The processes of interlinking and actively maintaining such women's initiatives have revealed the complexity of different needs and aspirations that, as underlined throughout this dissertation, have often impeded the improvement of women's and feminist views into daily actions.

Those seeking to understanding peace interventions in the occupied Palestinian territories have sought to dismantle the military occupation along with the ethno-national mainstream narratives; however, the attention of women activists has unavoidably remained linked to the core question of defining their own ethno-national identity. Therefore, women's political prospects, which have been founded on the central standpoint of taking into account different narrative identities, have needed to go beyond such assumptions, because considering 'Other' women's experiences has not been enough. In other words, the tricky issue of dealing with the so-called 'politics of difference' has to be deconstructed, overcoming the major feminist theories that have often continued to obscure other important voices.

²⁰⁷ Interview with Dorothy Naor, Jerusalem, November 30, 2009.

²⁰⁸ Interview with Molly Malekar, Jerusalem, October 19, 2009.

Among several points of view, the feminist scholar Judith Butler has pointed to the limitations of the foremost feminist interpretations, stating that:

“it would be wrong to assume in advance that there is a category of ‘women’ that simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete” (Butler, 1990: 15).

In Palestine/Israel as well, such a challenge may question the exclusive narratives that have trapped people in ambivalent conditions, in order to rethink the issue of differences and pluralities. The need for bridging identities has been evoked not only to connect ethno-national narratives among Palestinians and Jews, but also to build a women’s shared identity politics within their academic debate as well as their grassroots activism.

In the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel, the demand of women’s groups for challenging the male-biased mainstream narrative has been weakened by the unbalance between the alternative feminist trajectories and the present situation. In fact, despite their attempts to deconstruct gendered ethno-national structures, the current political agenda has increased the problems of their militaristic, discriminatory, and disintegrated societies even more. It has also implied that although women activists have tackled the *status quo*, their multiple internal perspectives have not been effective in applying a common struggle in terms of everyday strategy to broaden visible social changes. Nevertheless, the women’s internal debate still represents one of the main alternative positions from which starting both new political thinking and changing forms of grassroots actions may be possible. In such a direction, the feminist criticism has problematically highlighted how dominant and oppressive ethno-national discourses have affected individual and collective identities, in particular pointing to women’s solidarity when involved in conflict contexts.

2. ‘Civil Disobedience’ and ‘Non-Violent Resistance’ as Alternative Politics

In recent years, civil disobedience theory has been reintroduced along with the idea of non-violent actions in the major conflict resolution practices, such as in Palestine/Israel. Although it has remained a rather marginal issue within the Israeli-Palestinian mainstream, the question concerning its practical difficulties and socio-

political potential has developed in importance as a strategy which might be deployed in order to end the Israeli military occupation. This is the reason why, at this point of the research, I have decided to reflect on some feasible ways of challenging power structures in the future, which have been promoted by a number of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish activists, in particular women who have referred to such grassroots actions.

My intent is to conclude the dissertation by highlighting non-violent initiatives which have challenged the *status quo*, and which have involved the engagement of both Palestinians and Israeli Jews in joint struggles. Participants in these initiatives have continued to refuse and stand out against the current stalemate situation, albeit as a weak minority within their own societies. In the following paragraph I will try to comment on what emerged from my most recent section of fieldwork in June 2011, drawing particular attention to the most meaningful experiences that I encountered both in the West Bank and in Israel. I am aware that this part of the thesis represents only an initial stage of my study on civil disobedience and non-violent resistance, and I hope to be able to progress further with this line of research in the near future. This explains the reason why I do not have so many direct findings from the fieldwork on this subject area. However, I have attempted to give an introductory contribution by balancing material I have collected during my field research with the main literature on the topic.

2.1. Refusing to Be Enemies²⁰⁹: Some Theoretical Frameworks

The thinker who first suggested the concept of civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau, wrote in his masterpiece:

“unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. [...] Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is not possible to take a step further toward recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State

²⁰⁹ I have decided to use such an expression since it has represented the most well-known slogan adopted by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women since the 1990s when the earliest women’s joint initiatives started.

comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor” (Thoreau, 1849).

Though the idea of protest used by the American writer was specifically related to the refusal to pay taxes as an objection to slavery and oppression, the originality of this form of action has led to the universal importance of such wide spreading societal reactions. By considering civil disobedience as a whole entity, Thoreau directed his attention especially towards obedient citizens, in order to mobilise and challenge them to contest unjust policies. In his perspective, active civil disobedience should constitute one of the most feasible ways of resisting and refusing to cooperate with the oppressor side. Therefore, it can represent an influential political act aimed mainly at pressing others to become disobedient, rather than changing the opinion of the wider public itself.

As clarified by the political scientist Gene Sharp, who has focused on the theoretical approach of non-violent struggles, “the exercise of power depends on the consent of the ruled who, by withdrawing that consent, can control and even destroy the power of their opponent” (Sharp, 1973: 4). According to this view, violence leads to more violence; on the contrary, non-violent counteractions may become an alternative form of struggle in the current world. In fact, they have the potential to challenge authorities through a number of acts of protest as well as through persuasion and non-cooperation. In contemporary history, both direct and indirect actions have offered effective responses and political signals to oppressive forces, raising awareness among people in order to work for a change of the *status quo*.

At the base of such a politics, civil disobedience has dealt with the primacy of non-violent ethics and methods as necessary standpoints from which radical criticism has been developed. From this overview, grassroots organisations have given different meanings of non-violence, developed throughout historical-political tradition and considered as a pre-requisite of strategies used by the majority of peace movements. Moreover, since divergences in defining a widely accepted interpretation of non-violence have arisen, such a concept has assumed two main features, which have been described in terms of ‘factual reality’ and ‘analytical category’ (Unnithan and Singh, 1973: 11-19).

The practice of non-violence has been mostly applied in three different ways: in civil disobedience actions when activists expect to be arrested; in situations that involve peaceful ways to defend oneself in contrast to the use of violence; and in internal dynamics in order to stop violence within one's own organisation (Herngren, 1993: 17-19). According to this analysis, women's movements both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel have mainly experienced the first two cases. As I have studied and observed in the field, I may assume that both civil disobedience and non-violent resistance, acting often in combination, have represented the core of the most recent women's initiatives that I will describe in the following pages.

In this frame, Mohandas Gandhi conceptualised the meaning of *satyagraha* and its relation to the concept of civil disobedience, stating that the former is wider than the latter and it can be considered as the founding pillar of civil resistance politics. Regarding a specific perspective of Gandhi's way of non-violence in more detail, it is required to mention the so-called *ahimsa*, as a comprehensive principle. Gandhi explained how:

“non-violence to be a potent force must begin with the mind. Non-violence of the mere body without the co-operation of the mind is non-violence of the weak or the cowardly, and has therefore no potency. [...] But no institution can be made non-violent by compulsion. Non-violence and truth cannot be written into a constitution. They have to be adopted of one's own free will” (Gandhi in Mallick and Hunter, 2002: 71-73).

Along with such a concept, Gandhi introduced the idea of *satyagraha*, meaning literally 'holding on to truth', or better 'truth-force': “truth is soul or spirit. It is, therefore, known as soul-force. It excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish” (Gandhi, 1951: 3-4). By this way, resisters may reach a common understanding about their initial demands for truth and justice using non-cooperation and civil disobedience.

Thus, civil disobedience and non-violent resistance may direct their challenges to remove injustices and to contest the way through which governments have ruled their general socio-political systems. Both at the interpersonal and collective level, the aim of non-violent activists is to change their opponents' understanding and their sense of values. Following different methods, based mainly on protests, non-cooperation and non-violent interventions, a further debate has sought to analyse means and forces that could mostly provide counter-narratives able to overcome systems of domination and

oppression. By taking into consideration diverse initiatives founded on non-violent principles and pursued under institutional as well as non-institutional organisations, the activities of popular resistance and civil disobedience have started to receive more and more attention from the public opinions within conflict and post-conflict scenarios, starting with the Israeli-Palestinian context.

2.2. *Non-Violent Resistance and Civil Disobedience in Palestine/Israel*

Applying such a theoretical framework to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and in particular to the settler colonial paradigm, the right of popular resistance expressed by the occupied people, the Palestinians, has been recognised by many of the world-wide leaders who had a central role in the global non-violent struggle. Since before the establishment of the Jewish state, for instance, one of the international activists who supported oppressed peoples not only in their own native countries, but all around the world, Mohandas Gandhi, critically analysed such an issue. In particular, he clearly expressed his opinion regarding Jews in Palestine, writing that:

“I have no doubt that they are going about it in the wrong way. The Palestine of the Biblical conception is not a geographical way. It is in their hearts. But if they must look to the Palestine of geography as their national home, it is wrong to enter it under the shadow of the British gun. A religious act cannot be performed with the aid of the bayonet or the bomb. They can settle in Palestine only by the goodwill of the Arabs” (Gandhi, 1938).

At the time Gandhi wrote this, and since that period, Palestinian non-violent resistance had been and has continued to be a central political reality, although it has not been sustained at the institutional level. As demonstrated starting with the first *Intifadah*, civilian acts of disobedience and non-violent resistance have represented a significant part of the political strategy used by Palestinians against the Israeli military occupation.

However, especially in the last decade, the potential of such actions has taken a significant place in the controversial narrative of freedom struggles, as is shown by the re-emergence of civil resistance movements in the post-Oslo era both in the occupied Palestinian territories and inside the Jewish state. In a widespread discourse regarding civil popular resistance, unarmed struggle has begun to be seen as a key function in

tackling the Israeli military occupation, even if this kind of mobilisation has remained fragmented and limited to the most progressive social and political spheres. In particular, in the case of Palestinian activism, the practice of popular struggle has been referred to direct actions of resistance from common people, rather than those initiated by institutions and militant groups (Norman, 2010: 2-3). In fact, those who have espoused a strategy of non-violent resistance, even in the face of escalating struggles and brutality, have attempted to involve the majority of heterogeneous sectors of Palestinian civil society into new forms of resistance to the Israeli military occupation.

As detailed by the human rights activist Mazin Qumsiyeh, the Palestinian popular resistance has been described in terms of a movement that has dealt with:

“pressuring opponents to understand the injustice that they engage in; weakening the grip of opponents on power; strengthening the community, including forms of empowerment and steadfastness (*sumud* in Arabic); bolstering the ability to withstand injustice and do something about it (a positive, can-do attitude is challenging with any other technique); building self-sufficiency and improving standards of living; achieving justice, including the right to return and self-determination” (Qumsiyeh, 2011: 30).

In response to Israeli military occupation and to numerous violations of international law directed towards the native population, a large majority of Palestinians have supported the non-violent approach as the only viable solution to be applied in order to overcome the present impasse. In addition, as has been briefly mentioned with regard to Palestinian-Jewish joint struggles during the British Mandate, Palestinian non-violent resistance has a long and inspiring history that has culminated with the current initiatives taken by the *Palestinian Popular Resistance Movement* in the West Bank (Bröning, 2011; Qumsiyeh, 2011). In particular, most of the non-violent resistance actions in numerous villages around the West Bank and the role of *BDS* (boycotts, divestment, and sanctions) campaign represent significant examples of solidarity and egalitarian partnership among Palestinians, Israeli Jews and internationals in the direction of a joint future founded on justice in the land of Palestine.

On the other side, Israeli civil disobedience has set promising examples by developing protest activities and infringing the Israeli law considered as ‘illegal’ and

‘immoral’ (Hammerman, 2010)²¹⁰. In such a way, Israeli Jews have responded to the Palestinian call, objecting not only to the military occupation, but also to the wider pattern of violence and brutality used by the Jewish state throughout more than sixty years. Despite the fact that the world’s attention has been most often impressed by violent events and contrasting narratives, internal resistance has increased a stronger awareness about the way through which both sides should act in response to the separation policy implemented by institutional leaderships.

At the same time, such a perspective has required an extensive way of reflecting on the conventional understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian armed conflict which has demolished feasible alternatives of penetrating into non-violent and critical dynamics. As the journalist and activist Ali Abunimah has written in his analysis on the political situation during the second *Intifadah*:

“what is needed is a strong, popular campaign of resistance, based on non-violence and civil disobedience, involving the entire population. Such a strategy would be unable to eliminate all violence, but it would offer an alternative to the hopeless, and a powerful moral challenge to the occupier. It may also help transform the passive global support for the Palestinian cause into concrete actions” (Abunimah, 2003).

In looking into contemporary examples of resistance led mostly by women activists from villages in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel as well, in the following subparagraphs I aim at suggesting a necessary analytical shift from a focus on dialogue, as proposed by the literature on recognition and reconciliation, to a focus on solidarity, dealing with non-violent struggles. Since the mainstream strategies founded on the reconciliation paradigm have not been able to reach their initial objectives (as shown throughout the dissertation, and in particular in the analysis of the foremost Palestinian-Israeli women’s joint initiative called *Jerusalem Link*), a further discourse has become crucial, and this is the one regarding the significance of solidarity and its relationship with commonalities and differences among women activists. In this way, I argue that the current political mobilisation, above all the popular committees’ initiatives and civil disobedience acts, has required a reframing of non-violent resistance

²¹⁰ As will be examined in the end of the chapter, one of the most successful civil disobedience actions has been ‘We Do Not Obey’ led by a number of Israeli Jewish women together with Palestinian women from the West Bank.

in comparison with what was claimed before and during the Oslo Accords and was directed mainly towards mainstream conflict resolution theories.

2.3. *Palestinian Civil Resistance and Women's Involvement*

As a result of the situation on the ground engendered after Oslo (and as already described in chapter five), a number of prominent Palestinian-Israeli joint initiatives have been advocated in terms of peace, dialogue, coexistence, and reconciliation. This has meant that the large majority of such projects have been related to the other critical political result of the 1990s 'peace process', that is the 'normalisation' of power relationships between the 'occupier' and the 'occupied', reproducing a continuous status of asymmetry within the examples of Palestinian-Israeli joint projects. However, the claim for popular struggle has continued to be put forward by a wide framework of non-violent political actors, both in the Palestinian territories and inside the Jewish state, who have readdressed the focus of mobilisations, directing them firstly towards the Palestinian people, but also against the Israeli governmental policies.

Starting with the analysis of the Palestinian non-violent movement focused on women's activism involved in such experiences, two of the most well-known practices of resistance²¹¹ need to be conceptualised. In particular, these have represented civil struggles carried by *Popular Committees* from the main villages in the West Bank, and the *Boycotts, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS)* movement that has matured in its political and practical goals not only in Palestine/Israel, but around the world (Bröning, 2011: 139). Both of these political alternatives have made it possible to achieve popular support among Palestinians and Israeli Jews for adapting a variety of strategies that have included demonstrations, marches of return to symbolic places, different expressions of boycott, sailing and flying-in flotillas (especially to the Gaza Strip in order to break the Israeli blockade).

Although generally in the initial steps of similar non-violent acts male-dominated leaderships have controlled the entire scene, women's role has increased both individually and as a collective political group. In fact, as I will argue through

²¹¹ Another crucial struggle has dealt with attempting to lift the Israeli blockade on Gaza mainly through the establishment of grassroots coalitions founded by Palestinian, Jewish and international activists, such as the *Free Gaza Movement*.

quoting significant examples, women activists have demonstrated their ability, strength, and determination to succeed in their objectives and in motivating people from different backgrounds and political views to join in non-violent struggles.

Concerning especially the Palestinian villages in the West Bank, such as Bi'lin, Ni'lin, and Budrus fighting against the construction of the Wall, and others, above all, Nabi Saleh struggling in opposition to the illegal Israeli settlements, all of these have consolidated their actions in non-violent weekly demonstrations. Each local committee has been supported by a diversified coordination of Palestinian political parties (mainly from *Fatah*, *Hamas*, the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine*, and *Al-Mubadara*) as well as by international and Israeli peace activists (mostly from the group called *Anarchists Against the Wall*). This has represented an innovative development within the Palestinian political panorama, by being promoted by the vast majority of relevant leaderships, and, at the same time, by grassroots activists.

As a result of the fact that such ways of struggle have attempted to involve both men and women, women's voices have started to prevail in some villages, and also have begun to call the internal Palestinian socio-political reality into question. For instance, one of the foremost coordinators of the popular struggle in Nabi Saleh, Manal Tamimi, has stressed:

“here in Nabi Saleh there is something unique because we, as women, are directly involved in our demonstrations, while in other non-violent demonstrations around the West Bank you can find only a few women, they are mostly Palestinian men together with Israeli and international activists. Our weekly demonstrations are non-violent because they are popular (everybody can participate in it) and we want to show peacefully what we have not obtained from our previous actions (including armed ones). In the latest period, since the demonstrations have become more violent, we as women have tried to help in other ways, for instance to assist people injured”²¹².

A further celebrated case is related to the popular resistance movement in a small village called Budrus. As reported by the personal story of the two main leaders of the committee, Ayed Morrar and his daughter Iltezam Morrar:

“our strategy is to involve every component of the Palestinian society, understanding our community. Women are part of our struggle; we need of good unity within our community. Women have a leading role in our movement to

²¹² Interview with Manal Tamimi, Nabi Saleh, June 18, 2011.

make our demonstrations stronger; it belongs to the spirit of women and it is very effective to humanise the character of our demonstrations as well. In addition, women's presence has reduced the amount of violence used by the military. At the beginning Israeli soldiers were surprised and unprepared because they did not know how dealing with them. We believe that their participation is fundamental in increasing our influence and success during non-violent actions against the Israeli oppressor"²¹³.

Only a few Israeli Jews who have decided to join the Palestinian popular struggle have faced the challenging question of 'normalisation' of the *status quo* between the 'occupier' and the 'occupied'. Among them, a young woman activist from *Anarchists Against the Wall*, Adar Grayevsky, has underlined her political perspective by analysing the current reality of non-violent resistance in the West Bank and saying that:

"I am against the 'normalisation' politics. What we, as *Anarchists Against the Wall*, are trying to do is jointly act with Palestinians through a Palestinian land struggle. There are many Israeli groups that are active in the Palestinian struggle and it is clear to them that this is not an equal partnership. We are joining in solidarity with Palestinians, but we understand our specific place in that struggle and we do not have final say, the final say is the Palestinian one. The concept of 'dialogue groups' with Palestinians without acting against the occupation has no meaning. The grassroots involvement has developed relations and cooperation, but Palestinians always lead their collective struggle"²¹⁴.

Moreover, she has continued explaining in detail her way of joining in such grassroots activism by questioning the Israeli mainstream left wing:

"I think that the traditional Israeli Left, especially the Zionist Left, has definitively been an elite Ashkenazi movement and this is growing more and more. There are some groups that are trying to change it, but at the end activism is a privilege and the ability to spend time and not having to work twelve hours a day is a privilege. It is a question of class. In our group there are many people who are young, students. Our way of activism is very specific since it has a lot to do with physical confrontation towards army and police, you can get hurt by them during demonstrations"²¹⁵.

Such an issue has continued to be at the core of the whole debate, both among grassroots organisations and at the academic level, pointing up what Manal Tamimi has clearly expressed as follows:

²¹³ Interview with Ayed Morrar, Budrus, June 18, 2011

²¹⁴ Interview with Adar Grayevsky, Tel Aviv, June 13, 2011.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

“our problem is not with Jewish people, but with Zionism as an ideology. When we started our demonstrations, Israeli activists started to come here: this was the first time I could see the human side of Israeli Jewish people. I realised that there are also Israeli Jews who believe in peace, like us. I know that an increasing number of them are refusing their governmental policies. And since the last years one of my best friends has become a Jew. This is not the problem. We live all together, none has to try to steal other’s land, we want to live as neighbours, and not as enemies, not as ‘occupied’ and ‘occupiers’. For this reason we are against ‘normalisation’ since it creates normal relationships under the military occupation. First of all we need normal relationships between equal sides, between free people. I believe that it is time to create a successful example for the whole Middle East”²¹⁶.

However, the present reality has drawn an opposite and dramatic picture on the ground. Since 2009 the Israeli government has started to be aware of the political power raised by such non-violent resistance initiatives, and predominantly in Nabi Saleh, which has turned into a model for other popular committees across Palestine. Recent reports have shown how the Israeli army has deployed collective punishments towards the entire population of these villages that have promoted non-violent resistance demonstrations against the annexation Wall²¹⁷. The Israeli political strategy has progressively used diverse kinds of aggression to attack the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people, from home demolitions, to severe restrictions of freedom of movement, to arbitrary arrests, injuries, and killings. The Nabi Saleh struggle has been taken into account even by the most popular Israeli TV channels: they have showed Palestinian demonstrations and the ways through which the situation could become seriously problematic for the Israeli army, which has started to consider them as possible promoters of a third *Intifadah*.

With regard to the other above-mentioned practice of Palestinian resistance, since the first call launched by the Palestinian civil society in 2005, the *BDS* movement has advocated a struggle based on universal rights and international law that also includes the academic and cultural boycott of Israeli institutions. In supporting the initial Palestinian appeal for a *BDS* campaign from within Israel, a growing number of Israeli citizens have sustained and encouraged *BDS* actions, to further their view of a common future founded on real peace and equality among Palestinians, Jews and all

²¹⁶ Interview with Manal Tamimi, Nabi Saleh, June 18, 2011.

²¹⁷ See specific documentation provided by both Israeli and Palestinian human rights organisations, such as *B'tselem* and *Addameer*, in relation to the Israeli repression adopted towards villages that have promoted significant struggles against the annexation of their land by the Wall.

inhabitants of the region. Inside this movement, the *Coalition of Women for Peace*²¹⁸ has represented a central voice of the struggle; in fact, since 2005, at the end of the international conference of *Women in Black*, they approved the final declaration in which they expressed:

“support for the Palestinian call on the international community, to impose non-violent and effective measures such as divestment and sanctions on Israel, for as long as Israel continues to violate international law, and continues the occupation and the oppression of the Palestinian people” (Final Declaration - *Women in Black* International Conference ‘Women Resist Occupation and War’, 12-16 August 2005).

Later on, in November 2009, at the conclusion of a very contentious internal debate, the General Assembly of the *Coalition of Women for Peace* decided to support the Palestinian call for *BDS* and it has become an active part of the international movement.

2.4. *An Ongoing Example of Joint Politics in East Jerusalem*

In a complex status of ‘in-between’, the neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem is the most controversial symbol of non-violent resistance in a joint struggle led by both Palestinians and Israelis. In the Palestinian side of the city and close to the 1967 border between East and West Jerusalem, since the late 1990s Palestinian residents have faced up against Israeli Jewish settlers who have started to occupy Palestinian houses and buildings in order to increase their presence and their control all over the territory as much as possible²¹⁹. In the execution of such a plan, any future prospect of sharing Jerusalem has been made unachievable, and, moreover, this strategy has been used towards other communities nearby, such as in Silwan and in the Old City. Consequently, both Israelis and Palestinians, “who view what is happening in Sheikh

²¹⁸ See chapter four in relation to Israeli women’s political background and its internal heterogeneity among peace feminist organisations.

²¹⁹ This side of Jerusalem has started to be disputed in 1972 when two Jewish bodies, the *Sephardic Community Committee* and the *Knesset Yisrael Committee*, declared their legal ownership on the land and began legal suits. From that moment, a number of eviction claims have been presented to the Supreme Court, generating a situation of more than twenty Palestinian families evicted between 2008 and 2011, and others will be evicted in the near future.

Jarrah as a horrible injustice”, have founded the *Solidarity Movement* to work by means of non-violent democratic struggle towards the aim of:

“a joint, effective voice of Arabs and Jews against the discriminatory policies of the Israeli occupation. In the long term, its aim is to help to promote peace in Jerusalem and to create a more just society. [...] In Sheikh Jarrah you can see the problems of the entire occupation concentrated in one place and brought to a head. An extremist ideological body is trying to create a situation that will thwart a peace agreement for all Israelis and Palestinians by creating facts on the ground” (*Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity Movement* leaflet, 2010).

On the one hand, the almost daily clashes between Jewish settlers and Palestinian residents have been rather tense due to the partial role of the Israeli police, who have not opposed the violence exercised by ultra-orthodox Jews. On the other hand, the increase in civil disobedience actions led by Israeli Jewish peace activists has meant that a public dissident voice has arisen within Israeli society, by operating not only in opposition to injustices perpetrated in Sheikh Jarrah, but also struggling against the general situation in the West Bank and inside Israel as well.

In the context of Sheikh Jarrah, women’s political role may be divided into two main discourses: the first one is connected with Palestinian women from the neighbourhood who have organised themselves into the *Women’s Forum of Sheikh Jarrah*, and have directly faced the Israeli evictions; the second concerns the position of Israeli women inside the *Solidarity Movement* and their relationships with Palestinian women. As part of the community that has been primarily involved in the effect of the evictions and in settlers’ daily violence, Palestinian women have challenged their own society by stressing their responsibility in resisting the Israeli oppression by means of peaceful popular struggle. On this point, the coordinator of the *Forum*, Amal al-Qassem has stated:

“we have started our work in the *Women’s Forum* in Sheik Jarrah after the eviction of al-Kurd family, the first one among other twenty-seven families that are refugees from 1948 land. We have started to organise ourselves as women because we were doing everything. We faced all the evictions by ourselves”²²⁰.

Furthermore, in relation to the issue of their human and political closeness to Israeli Jewish women, she has admitted that:

²²⁰ Interview with Amal al-Qassem, Ramallah, June 16, 2011.

“not all Palestinian people trust them because they come from very different organizations. We are against ‘normalisation’. Nowadays we are not equal. When we are equal in everything we can speak together from the same level. Most of the Israeli activists are expressing their solidarity for the Palestinians, but in which way? What is their role and what is our role? Sometimes I believe that they are doing these demonstrations more for themselves than for us”²²¹.

Concerning the Israeli activists of the *Solidarity Free Movement*, one of the leaders Sara Benninga has stressed her belief in the basic principle of working together, Palestinians and Jews, in order to sit around the same table every week and decide about the following week’s demonstrations and non-violent actions. Remembering the initial steps of her involvement, she said:

“I started going every week and then, after half a year, there was a general meeting among Jerusalemite people to think what doing about Sheikh Jarrah because of the evictions. We decided to organise a march from West to East Jerusalem: at the beginning it was very small, then it became very big and significant. During our demonstrations the majority of participants are Israeli Jews, because Palestinians are a bit scared to come out. However, it is a joint work. As Israelis, we want to change the reality and create dialogue with Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah and from other neighbourhoods around. We work both with Palestinians and inside our society (for instance, mainly tours and school courses in East Jerusalem and also in the Negev). We want to spread our struggle all over the land of Palestine”²²².

The Israeli side, on the other hand, has become aware of the risk that these actions pose to their government, which has started to arrest more and more peace activists inside the Jewish state itself with the purpose of limiting and discouraging Israeli citizens from backing such politics. For instance, one major attempt of contrasting Israeli peace activists (and in particular, women) took place in the summer 2010 when a few of Israeli Jewish feminist mainstream accused Israeli leftist feminist women for silencing sexual harassments in Sheikh Jarrah, generating an internal sticky discussion within the Israeli feminist movement. In a parallel way, the political investigation on several Israeli peace and feminist organisations²²³ conducted by the

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Interview with Sara Benninga, Sheikh Jarrah, June 17, 2011.

²²³ In addition to Ilana Hammerman and her group, another Israeli peace feminist organisation *New Profile* (see chapter four) has been under investigation. As reported on the *New Profile* website by the activist Adina Aviram: “we, in New Profile, try to offer a different way of thinking, engendered by a critical perspective on our lives here. We do this because our conscience tells us so and from a sense of

Israeli police has focused on the objective of intimidating and making analogous joint non-violent actions organised by Israeli Jews together with Palestinians illegal.

In response to such accusations, a number of Israeli feminist and peace-oriented women have put into question their roles as citizens of the Jewish state (the ‘occupier’) and, especially, their awareness in supporting Palestinian women (the ‘occupied’) through joint struggles based on women’s solidarity in opposition to military occupation. Concerning this subject, one of the most eminent feminist peace activists Yvonne Deutsch has written the following reflection:

“when I am in East Jerusalem I am fully aware of being an occupier (albeit a resistant occupier) or a guest. The fact that I oppose the occupation does not take away my membership of the occupying society. [...] I do not believe that our role as members of the occupying society is to ‘free’ Palestinian women from oppression. Our role is rather to support their struggle to free themselves from the occupation. If a trust relationship is developed between Israeli and Palestinian women and if they ask for our solidarity on feminist issues and women’s oppression, of course our role is to be there. But first they have to invite us to join them. Otherwise we risk falling into well-known colonial attitudes that try to ‘free’ the colonized from what we perceive as the ‘darkness’ and ‘backwardness’ they suffer from” (Deutsch, 2010).

2.5. *Resisting from Within: Israeli Jewish Women and Civil Disobedience*

The Sheikh Jarrah joint struggle should be considered not only in relation to the context of East Jerusalem, but also as a spreading reaction of Palestinians and Israelis who no longer wish to be part of the pre-constructed paradigms of opposite narratives in conflict and under military occupation. In looking thoughtfully at Israeli society (in terms of the ‘occupier’), some of the participants, mostly women, have decided to break the discriminatory Israeli law by joining in acts of civil disobedience directed against their own government’s policies. The initial stage of one of the most prominent women’s civil disobedience actions was acted out in May 2010, when the writer and activist Ilana Hammerman decided to enable a group of Palestinian women to enter Israel and to enjoy the sea for the first time in their lives. In an article published in the

responsibility. We refuse to accept the militarist life style that dominates Israeli existence. This militarism makes it possible to delegitimise those who dare to question accepted wisdom and are guided by their conscience - as against society’s dictates and norms. Members of our organisation are being politically persecuted these very days. The aim is to intimidate and silence us” (27th May 2009, <URL:<http://www.newprofile.org/english/?p=128>>).

Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* and entitled *If There Is a Heaven*, Hammerman described a special day of fun with three Palestinian young women in Tel Aviv, concluding:

“[...] and then we would have taken two cars and six young women, and maybe men too, and given not only them but also ourselves a feeling of freedom, temporary but still profound and meaningful” (*Ha'aretz*, 7th May 2010).

After that event, other women decided to join civil disobedience initiatives and, on the 23rd July 2010, twelve Israeli Jewish women²²⁴ publicly announced their choice not to obey an ‘illegal and immoral law’ (referring to their violation of the ‘Law of Entry’ into Israel in order to carry out their acts of disobedience). Following in the footsteps of Hammerman’s previous trips, Israeli women together with Palestinian women from villages in the West Bank crossed the military checkpoints illegally in order to give the opportunity to Palestinian women to experience, though only for a day, the meaning of being free to travel wherever they wanted. These Israeli women wrote the statement *We Do Not Obey* that was reported on *Ha'aretz* as follows:

“we cannot assent to the legality of the ‘Entry into Israel Law’, which allows every Israeli and every Jew to move freely in all regions between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River while depriving Palestinians of this same right. [...] It is not we who are violating the law: the State of Israel has been violating it for decades. It is not we -women with a democratic conscience- who have transgressed: the State of Israel is transgressing, spinning us all into the void” (*Ha'aretz*, 6th August 2010).

Nonetheless, the consequential risk related to such illegal trips has been higher for Palestinian women who could face severe punishments if discovered inside the Israeli territory without a permit. This and similar civil disobedience initiatives have produced a contentious debate inside Israel, where an attitude of violent intolerance towards civil and human rights activists has grown. The peak of this aggressive climate was reached when the organisation called *Legal Forum for the Land of Israel* asked the Attorney General to open a criminal investigation into Hammerman’s group due to their violation of Israeli law. In this way, the legal issue has continued to be at the core of such Israeli women’s acts of civil disobedience (as started with Thoreau), and, specifically, the violating of the ‘Entry into Israel Act’, since the spirit of this act does

²²⁴ At the time of writing, the women’s group named *Lo Metsaytot* (meaning ‘We Do Not Obey’ in Hebrew) has a website only in Hebrew.

not belong within the ethical and political consciousness of women activists. These women have effectively underlined the absolute asymmetry between the right of every Israeli and Jew to move freely and the negation of this fundamental right for the native Palestinians.

This attitude has been well explained by an activist who signed the original statement, Nitza Aminov, and who has made clear that:

“the most significant challenge is for the Israeli society. Our group now is about thirty women. I do not know how we can continue to do it. We are looking for other ideas about actions of disobedience. Through our connections, it has been possible to build strong relationships between the ‘occupier’ and the ‘occupied’. But we are working on disobedience, and not about empowering women and so on. Israeli women do not understand deeply the relation between us, the ‘occupier’, and them, the ‘occupied’; they feel to be obliged to help them, but often they do not know how”²²⁵.

Concerning her point of view on their civil disobedience actions, she has stated that:

“for me solidarity is also a political act, it is part of my activity. Of course, inside my group there are many different political views, from the ‘one-state solution’ to the ‘two-state solution’, from Zionists to anti-Zionists. For me this group is on acting ‘civil disobedience’, I do not know how it will grow and develop. It means to go against the law, not to accept the law. The law does not permit to Palestinians to enter Israel. We think that it is immoral what is going on, and this is why we will continue to keep the right of the Palestinians, of silent people”²²⁶.

As women who have theorised and practiced civil disobedience, the group organised one of the most successful joint conferences by Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women on the 12th March 2011 in the town of Beit Ommar in the occupied Palestinian territories. At this conference, about two hundred and fifty women from a number of varied backgrounds discussed civil disobedience from different perspectives. By emphasising their objection to military occupation and the use of violence as well as by condemning the complete violation of fundamental human rights, such as the suffering (and in several circumstances the death) of Palestinian women at the checkpoints and the denial of Palestinian freedom of movement, all the participants have agreed with the

²²⁵ Interview with Nitza Aminov, East Jerusalem, June 14, 2011.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

fact that joint non-violent actions may represent one of the last feasible strategies to be implemented in order to face the Israeli power. Both at the political level and within the emotional-private sphere, Palestinian and Israeli women have shared their experiences, their points of view and their prospects for the inspiration of further similar ways of everyday resistance.

As a result of this, other women and men within Israeli civil society have started to sustain Hammerman and her group publicly, calling for move to increase the hope of change by taking part in instances of civil disobedience. Above all, in June 2011, three hundred higher education lecturers signed a public advertisement in *Ha'aretz* newspaper in support of Hammerman's group. Regarding such women's initiatives, they wrote:

“in these dark hours, we are willing to drive our guests, Palestinian women and children, to hide them and to support their challenge in any other way, whether in deeds or in words. The action of these women shows the right way for any Israeli citizen who truly supports a democracy respectful of human rights. Should Israel's legal system find it appropriate to prosecute and penalize these women we shall be willing to support them, to join them and to be tried alongside them” (*Ha'aretz*, 17th June 2011).

2.6. *Women's Political Mobilisation: a Way Forward*

In recent times, remarkable political results have been achieved on the ground, with significant examples taking place in Budrus in 2004, and in Bi'lin in 2011²²⁷. Similar successes may be considered as being the implementation of the discourse that was primarily suggested by Edward W. Said, who critically discussed the necessity of a Palestinian internal change by means of non-violent and popular strategy. As he wrote, referring directly to Palestinians, but more widely to people who live in Palestine/Israel:

“what is needed is a creative method of struggle which mobilizes all the human resources at our disposal to highlight, isolate, and gradually make untenable the main aspects of Israeli occupation” (Said, 2002).

²²⁷ Concerning the two most well-known symbols of non-violent resistance in the West Bank, the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the moving of the route of the Wall (also known as the 'Defence Barrier') closer to the Green Line. In spite of this, the construction of a new one is not expected to result in the return of much previously-seized territory to the original Palestinian landowners.

As explored in this chapter, these words can be applied to several political actions which have taken place both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, in which women have affirmed themselves as leading actors within their different historical and socio-political contexts. By empowering themselves and acting in more creative and rather successful ways, they have advanced their own culture of resistance. This has mainly meant transforming and restructuring the previous struggles, firstly those directed against the Israeli military occupation, and then those directed more generally towards the internal as well as external oppressive power-relations.

In doing this, what has emerged throughout my fieldwork (and is mostly reported in extracts of the interviews I conducted) has indicated the necessity of building up a way of acting to foster a more pragmatic solidarity among women. In such an ongoing climate of conflict, Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's struggles and resistance continue to be vital to those wishing to reject the *status quo*. Moreover, their idea of solidarity is connected with a growing attention towards their own differences, making space for alternative conceptions of understanding as well as practicing non-violence. Even though some internal tensions have remained (especially related to the controversial issue of power asymmetry), the examples I have shown throughout the thesis can prove that women's involvement in such political actions has produced a potential for a growing strength, in resisting and experiencing solidarity through difference.

In the common perception, the majority of such political demonstrations established on civil disobedience and non-violent resistance principles have been perceived as passive strategies. However, on the contrary, they respond to the need for an active role for people who refuse to be part of the predominant system, and who decide consciously to embrace non-violence in order to condemn the Israeli government. In this sense, the rise of women's mobilisation related to civil disobedience and non-violent resistance has suggested a more inclusive way of resisting their own governmental policy (specifically in the case of Israeli women), as well as the military occupation, including all of its multifaceted consequences caused by the Wall and the expansion of illegal settlements, but particularly the effects they have on the daily life of Palestinian women. In such a framework, meaningful interactions between women intellectuals and grassroots activists have emerged, reflecting an influential development into new political directions beyond the crystallised feminist dichotomy of theoretical knowledge and action.

Nevertheless, at the same time, the complexity that has characterised women's activism in everyday challenges within their own societies as well as in cooperation with the other side has implied the necessity of stressing all the contradictions emerging from the current reality. Not only has the paradigm 'occupier' and 'occupied' become something extremely controversial within the various women's feminist struggles, but it has also required a more thorough examination of the power relationships inside the women's movements themselves. Although the experiences described above have involved grassroots Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, Israeli Jewish women as the citizens of an occupying society cannot withdraw from pursuing their own internal criticism in order to achieve real freedom and justice for the oppressed side. In agreement with this political perspective, the feminist activist and academic Daphna Golan has stated that:

"like Ilana Hammerman, I too refuse to obey illegal laws. In a country where spacious prisons were built under the protection of the law, in which people live in fear, it is not only our right but our duty to offer a space of hope. As long as we do not have agreed-upon borders, we are living in an occupying country that discriminates between the rights of different groups based on their ethnicity. In such a country, just like in South Africa under apartheid, it is our right and our duty to challenge the legality of the law" (*Ha'aretz*, 27th December 2010).

On the other hand, the Israeli government has continued to legislate laws with the intention of silencing any form of internal opposition and of further restricting freedom of speech among Israeli citizens²²⁸. Within this context, the defence of the human dignity and freedom of every person, which has been at the centre of the history of women's movements both in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories, has appeared as one of the few remaining political views with the potential to start a just process of recognition and reconciliation. At least on a theoretical level, the alternative voices I tried to give space to throughout this final chapter, emerging from Budrus to Jerusalem, as well as from Nabi Saleh to Tel Aviv, could still provide an opportunity to overcome the current impasse.

²²⁸ The *Nakba*'s law, a law revoking government funding for groups that mark the Palestinian Catastrophe - the *Nakba*, and the *Anti-Boycott* law, enabling the filing of civil lawsuits against those who call for boycotting the state of Israel or any of its institutions and territories, were approved respectively in March and July 2011, with the aim of deterring criticism and protests against current Israeli policy.

CONCLUSION

Through the course of the research which has culminated in this thesis, I have developed an increasing awareness of the importance of considering Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's political activism within a theoretical framework based on the feminist critique related to conflict contexts, and specifically to the reality of military occupation as the main ongoing obstacle to peace. I have also grown in certainty that continuing with this analysis may be relevant and necessary for the debate to realise a just, shared future in the land of Palestine under mutual recognition and reconciliation. Although the search for a peaceful way out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has continued to be considered intractable and its goal to be elusive, what has emerged from the women I interviewed can be regarded as a significant challenge towards the *status quo*.

On the other hand, in a struggle between an 'occupier' and an 'occupied', the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be reduced to the issues of recognition and reconciliation, as founding pillars of a feasible conflict resolution. Throughout my study it has also been important to take account of the structural conditions that have characterised the reality on the ground in Palestine/Israel, without ignoring historical and political roots causes of such a conflict. Whilst attempting to understand the major consequences generated by the persistence of military occupation, my work has mainly focused on Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's political initiatives directed towards the bridging between conflicting stories by means of parallel and joint projects, with the purpose of deconstructing and redirecting their principal alternative views and perspectives.

In particular, in the development of my research I have discussed the main ways through which women activists have applied their diverse strategies and practices, starting from their national women's movements and joint projects, in order to resist the everyday conflict reality. In this frame, I have identified a conclusive interpretation of the findings from my fieldwork, by evidencing the necessity of looking at the heterogeneous structure of women's movements both in the West Bank and in Israel. This has meant that while on the one hand these women's feminist experiences that I collected may be representative of what has occurred, especially in the last ten years, within the most prominent cases of Palestinian and Israeli women's political activism,

on the other hand it is important to be aware of their internal challenges. I have interpreted these interviews taking into account such a complex contradiction between women's narratives concerning their mobilisation against military occupation and their relationship with their own ethno-national identities, in addition to their internal divisions.

For this reason, despite the existence of substantial contributions from established scholars in relation to the most recognised challenges of women's movements, I have attempted to question and, at the same time, to expand on the existing feminist peace literature. By deconstructing the way through which Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's political actions have faced the linkage between feminism(s) and ethno-national narrative identities under military occupation, I have analysed the above-mentioned women's initiatives through suggesting another possible narrative, as well as by considering their relative significances contextualised within contemporary political theory. In this way, my research has also considered the most recent examples which are useful in understanding Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's political mobilisation, in order to balance their fragmented identities and their mutual as well as conflicting interactions.

Starting with the Introduction section, I have attempted to follow an analytical path in which the key paradigm of women's political participation in resistance to the *status quo* might assume coherent meanings within the persistence of military occupation and the widespread construction of exclusivist ethno-national narrative identities. The historical and contemporary cases I have used in my study have demonstrated a similar challenge, which has been worsened by a common denial of recognising the asymmetry of power and privileges between Palestinians and Israeli Jews in women's initiatives as well. By taking into account as many elements of this complex situation as possible, I have interrelated past events with the most recent examples of political alternatives which have tried to encourage new, viable parameters for coming debates on conflict resolution.

Within the plurality of narratives concerning women's political activism in Palestine/Israel, I have sought to record my intellectual journey through a multi-perspective approach, in order to go beyond the standardised paradigms related to women's feminist challenges in the peculiarity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In line with the deep-seated intertwining between everyday realities and the conflicting issues

of Palestinians and Israeli Jews, I have found it necessary to look into the political experiences of those women activists who have contributed unconventional ways of discussing and tackling the nature of this protracted conflict. In this frame, my aim has been to articulate analytical lenses through which it is useful to explore how a considerable number of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women joining in the political debate have developed original insights concerning their own narrative identities, alongside the striving for a prospect of future reconciliation. Above all, the most difficult obstacle has been represented by the impossibility of reducing several different understandings and experiences of women's activism into a package which fits within the mainstream feminist critique.

This is why I have aimed to partially deconstruct conventional feminist and peace literature itself in order to stress the complexity within Palestinian and Israeli women's movements in relation to their mutual as well as internal interactions. Embracing what has been defined as 'intersectionality', I have stressed the relationships among the multiple dimensions that have characterised diverse forms of social relations and constructions of narrative identities. In such a way, I hope to have provided an analytical contribution by linking what has been deeply discussed by the current feminist scholarship, in particular the feminist peace literature on conflict contexts, and what I have empirically determined during my fieldwork.

In pursuing this research object, I have reported on the most prevalent issues, standpoints and practices of women's politics from diverse contexts, along with the commonalities and contradictions also expressed through their own ethno-national collective narratives. As shown in detail in chapters three and four, Palestinian women activists (both in the West Bank and inside Israel) have experienced everyday struggles under military occupation and unequal laws; while Israeli Jewish women interviewees have pursued their actions against the increasing militarisation of their society, forming their understanding of military occupation by embracing approaches that are, for the most part, defined as feminist. Examining what has emerged as the outcome of my fieldwork, it becomes clear that Palestinian women activists, as women living in a stateless nation, have strongly debated their support or rejection of a feminist perspective within their own national resistance movement, and that the internal disputes and challenges within the Israeli Jewish women's groups, as part of an occupying state, have in many cases been associated with ethnic and class divisions, whilst carrying out action seeking to further support for Palestinian women's resistance.

In addition, within the Israeli women's peace and feminist background, the central question regarding their contradictory visions towards Zionism (considered as the guiding principle of the Jewish state and the basis of its current policies) has continued to remain a major taboo. In my analysis I have specifically underlined the fact that, since the 1970s, middle-class Ashkenazi feminists have assumed hegemonic power in the internal dynamics of peace women's organisations; thus, the Mizrahi and the Palestinian women citizens of Israel who wish to be active in this area have been subordinated by the Ashkenazi elite. Acknowledging the work of those feminist scholars and grassroots activists who have described and demonstrated how the Ashkenazi women have a privileged position within such movements, my contribution has attempted to further explore internal Jewish divisions, and the negative influence they have on joint cooperative actions involving Palestinian women both from inside Israel and from the West Bank.

In the same context, bearing in mind a few of the historic joint initiatives and struggles between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women since the beginning of the XX century, I have examined in particular one of the most prominent Palestinian-Israeli women's coalitions, the *Jerusalem Link*. Although they are usually seen as projects founded on the concept of 'peace dialogue' initiated in the 1990s with the Oslo process, such initiatives have still been marked by unequal power-relationships and discriminations occurring among their participants, with a recent peak in this problem resulting from *Operation Cast Lead* in 2008/9. In reflecting upon recurrent controversies and clashes within similar women's political commitments, the equality pattern still represents the most problematic boundary in a situation of 'normalised' military occupation. Consequently, the majority of women I interviewed during my fieldwork have admitted the effective demise of joint politics that has missed its initial aims and practices. Whether it has been complex to analyse tangible gains that women have achieved, such joint initiatives have at least shaped consciousness towards their political movements as well as towards their own societies. Indeed, although most of them have not wanted to put a definitive end to such projects, the original idea of cooperation and mutual recognition diminished in value with regard to its potential for carrying forwards a shared future between Palestinians and Israeli Jews.

The complex reality of the Palestinian and Israeli women activists I encountered in the course of my research may be described as being the core of many stories of

struggle, resistance and also of failure. By reporting on major cases experienced by women interviewees, I have striven for a better understanding of both joint and internal dynamics. Since the initial stage I have been aware of the multitude of frames through which I could choose to go deeply into such issues: on the one side, the vast majority of feminist theorists have reflected on the two main dimensions relating to women's socio-political role in nationalist constructions and women's criticism in opposition to the ongoing conflict; on the other, the internal situation within women's feminist movements themselves has required analysis. In questioning the compatibility between feminism(s) and nationalism, it is fundamental to be aware of each specific historical and political context analysed.

Moreover, I sought to pay attention to women's alternative discourses capable of moving beyond those dominant standpoints which have been progressively established on exclusivist boundaries. By following the foremost studies conducted from a critical viewpoint by the major scholars on the issues of women's activism in Palestine/Israel, among which are those from Ronit Lentin, Nahla Abdo, Tamar Mayer, Simona Sharoni, and Sophie Richter-Devroe, my work has aimed to integrate such previous researches, and at the same time, to suggest a further perspective on the exploration of the different discourses that have informed women's activism in the last years in the West Bank and inside the Jewish state. To treat women's mobilisation as a central dimension to be considered in the process of recognition and reconciliation in Palestine/Israel, my analysis has also observed not only that women's political initiatives have to be more visible, but also that this could illuminate both theories and practices directed towards a potential political plan founded on women's experiences of struggle and solidarity.

From this view, my research can be mostly considered as a heuristic illustration, since it has raised additional questions concerning possible ways through which Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women activists could translate their analytical debates into the practices of everyday politics. In looking at their internal national and joint initiatives, my analysis has also considered further case studies within the context of some more universalised examples of women's opposition to conflict realities such as those in Northern Ireland and South Africa. When considering such forms of activism and making comparisons with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it must be borne in mind that several projects and direct actions have not achieved their initial objectives, although the majority of women activists have fought impressively hard to advance

their participation and their role in the face of violence and discriminations perpetrated by the dominant side.

The wide gap between the theoretical plans suggested by women's feminist organisations and what has happened in reality has created a prolonged impasse. This has continued to be a problematic issue not only in relation to women's mobilisation, but also in the way it has been concerned with past and current alternative politics to the dominant mainstream, such as in general inside leftist peace groups and political parties. Furthermore, in the serious paralysis of both civil societies such a discontinuity between theory and reality has been amplified by the effect of the silencing (often by using violent methods) of the influential role of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish peace activists by Israeli governments.

Even though the major examples of women's political activism in Palestine/Israel have been not able to effectively connect their standpoints with their actions, the value of their struggles against the Israeli military occupation and, additionally, in the advancement of alternative paradigms within male-dominated peace activism, is hard to dispute. Within the Israeli left-wing a contentious debate has taken place on this matter, but few have yet begun to realise the necessity of moving towards a renewed agenda, combining their different critical perspectives beyond conventional schemes. Most of the Israeli Jewish women interviewees have challenged, at least at the theoretical level, the current deadlock in order to give another chance in the direction of an effective political strategy. In this sense, the demand for a radical transformation in women's peace activism has begun to spread inside Israeli society, despite the fact that other discriminatory policies have obstructed a wider women's involvement for peace and social justice.

This critique, along with significant initiatives developed in the field, has become a fundamental tool for restructuring political practices as well as for readdressing useful, albeit problematic, prospects towards a future feminist and peace-oriented project. What has been called 'transversal politics', together with the 'politics of difference', may be used to illustrate how a number of feminist approaches have focused on the importance of comprehending encounters among differences both within unfair societies and in grassroots joint movements. My objective in examining such different forms of women's activism has been to reconsider the conceptual links that

may connect them into reciprocal dialectics which may help towards a feasible future peace.

The complexity of the ethno-national narrative identities existing in Palestine/Israel within the context of military occupation has continued to be central in the story of women's activism, as played out through their diverse historical and political backgrounds; as a consequence, their multi-layered viewpoints and the plurality of their experiences have not yet been completely recognised. In my view, this has represented one of the most decisive reasons for the collapse of several women's political projects, and in particular the Palestinian-Israeli joint ones. By contrast, the crossing of identity boundaries and the making of social connections have been problematised in many situations by the women I met during my fieldwork, with this activity seen as necessary in order to cultivate a fair politics of resistance and solidarity between Palestinians and Israeli Jews.

In reflecting on a subsidiary aspect evidenced by my research, namely the illusory nature of the mutual cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women, I hope to have shown how the range of women's feminist political engagement is interrelated with contrasting meanings and strategies. Following a brief review of the foremost literature concerning the most contemporary examples of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience, and attempting to relate this to the outcomes of my field research, I have questioned in which way Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women activists have started a shift from a politics focused on the significance of dialogue to a politics aimed at shaping solidarity in an asymmetric and discriminatory reality such as the ongoing Israeli military occupation. In following this path, I have called attention to the existence of a challenging turning point in the current course of women's activism conducted mostly on the grassroots level. This suggests unprecedented discussions and non-violent actions led jointly by Palestinian and Israeli women, conceived as critical voices within the women's feminist movements themselves. In fact, the encouragement of solidarity by women activists who have stressed their criticism around issues of power relationships between the 'occupier' and the 'occupied' (including peace-oriented and feminist contexts) means attempting to develop a real trust and cooperation anchored into the reality on the ground.

In a further prospect, although the debate on the achievability of narratives beyond nationalism has thus far only remained at the academic level, Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women peace activists have attempted to tackle their political

marginalisation within their own communities, readdressing mainstream agendas by a sort of counter-narrative directed towards the dominant ethno-nationalist societal framework. As evidenced in the last section of the research, after the dramatic events that followed the demise of the Oslo Accords, the women's struggle has gradually become once again a force for illuminating their societies. In the wider context of Palestinian-Israeli peace activism, the meaning of grassroots actions and campaigns conducted non-violently has been redefined in different ways, though it has never been included in the official 'peace process'. In carrying out my work, I have needed to underline the way in which Palestinian and Israeli women's political activism has tried at least to open a new discussion space, providing an alternative to the predominant and ineffective 'top-down' strategies aimed towards conflict resolution. In confronting diverse realities on the ground as well as trying to redefine an effective way forward founded on recognition and reconciliation, the relevance of my research represents a basis for future work.

In detail, the deconstructive approach of highlighting internal tensions and the complexities within human interactions experienced by women activists both in the West Bank and in Israel can be further explored. If the majority of women I met during my fieldwork have expressed an awareness of the difficulties in changing their daily situation, they have nevertheless been vigorously engaged in intellectual debates and active mobilisation opposing the 'normalised' military occupation and growing ethno-nationalisms. By taking account of both theoretical arguments and political initiatives in the field, they have struggled to deconstruct and, later on, to reconstruct from different viewpoints the significance of women's activism from below, through extending their refusal to consider the 'Other' only as the enemy.

Observing the wave of socio-political protests that have awoken the entire Middle East since the beginning of 2011, I am prompted to think that perhaps these Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women's stories, which I have tried to shed light on throughout my thesis, may now begin to show the influence of these wider regional developments, and that it is reasonable to expect that they may shift from their idealist vision towards more concrete political responses, moving the participants beyond their present state of disillusionment. If ever there was a precise moment to track and to pursue this alternative road towards a real peace process in Palestine/Israel, it is now, at the time of publication of this thesis. The most significant examples of such political initiatives have a historic opportunity to develop their promising outlooks, building on

what has emerged from women's personal as well as collective experiences during the last decade.

APPENDIX

Sample Interview Questions

I would like to start our meeting asking you about some of the most significant experiences in your socio-political involvement that you can consider as turning points in your life. When and why did you decide to join in the political life in the West Bank/in Israel?

Have you specifically been engaged with women's and feminist movements?

Focusing on the relationship between your narrative identity as woman and/or as feminist activist and the ethno-national collective narrative identity, which one has prevailed in the formation of your own individual identity?

In your everyday life how are you able to manage these two challenging narrative identities?

What does being a woman mean in your society?

How can you define the term 'feminism(s)' in your personal and collective experience?

How do you relate your everyday political commitment with the increase of ethno-nationalism in the land of Palestine/Israel?

What about the internal heterogeneity within women's and feminist movements in the West Bank/in Israel?

With regard to the representation of the 'Other' side, what is your opinion concerning the founding pillars of Israeli-Palestinian joint projects, and in particular women's joint initiatives, such as the *Jerusalem Link*?

Do you believe in the potential benefit of any kind of relationship between women political activists from contrasting sides?

Considering the subject of Israeli-Palestinian joint initiatives, what do you think about the role of international peace-oriented organisations and/or NGOs, in relation to their influence within the reconciliation process between Palestinians and Israeli Jews?

In particular regarding women's joint narratives, what is your opinion looking towards feasible political alternatives suggested by the current women's politics?

The last question is related to the future prospects for the land of Palestine. Considering the *status quo*, what is your personal idea about future challenges? What do you think will be the long-term reality for Palestine/Israel, also reflecting on the ongoing debate about which possibility could be the most viable one between the so-called 'one-state solution' and the historic 'two-state solution'?

List of Interviewees

Within Israeli Women's Activism:

Gali Agnon
Nitza Aminov
Khulood Badawi
Shirin Batshon
Sara Benninga
Judy Blanc
Rula Deeb
Yvonne Deutsch
Ruti Divon
Nabila Espanioly
Bilha Golan
Esther Goldenberg
Haggith Gor
Adar Grayevsky
Ruth Hiller
Shula Keshet
Molly Malekar
Eilat Maoz
Dorothy Naor
Anat Saragusti
Erella Shadmi
Michal Zak
Edna Zaretsky-Toledano

Within Palestinian Women's Activism:

Wafa Abdel RahDima Aweidah
Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas

Huda al-Imam
Amal al-Qassem
Naila Ayesh
Amira Hilal
Lama Hourani
Mariam Ikermawi
Islah Jad
Rania Khayyat
Amal Khreishe
Khitam Saafin
Rula Salameh
Manal Tamimi

List of Organisations

Agenda
Ahoty (My Sister)
Al-Tafula Center (For the Child)
Anarchists Against the Wall
Bat Shalom
Coalition of Women for Peace
Combatants for Peace
Filastiniyat
General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW)
International Women's Commission (IWC)
Isha L'Isha
Jerusalem Center for Women (JCW)
Jerusalem Link
Kayan - Feminist Organization
Machsom Watch
Movement of Democratic Women for Israel (TANDI)
New Profile

Palestinian and Israeli Coalition Against House Demolition
Palestinian Popular Resistance Movement
Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development (PWWSO)
Physicians for Human Rights (PHR)
Rural Women Development Society (RWDS)
Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity Movement
Ta'ayush (Arab Jewish Partnership)
Women's Affair Center (WAC)
Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC)
Women's Forum Sheikh Jarrah
Women in Black

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