GENERAL IMAGE OF PALESTINIAN FAMILIES IN TRANSITION: A CASE STUDY OF THE PALESTINIANS IN MALAYSIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this case study is to examine the general image of Palestinian families in transition, highlighting their uncertain and unstable living conditions that they have been experiencing for almost seven decades since the 1948 catastrophe which has historically transformed their status from natives into displaced refugees in various countries around the world. The study also reveals how the families perceive and express themselves within the context of their unstable life before and after their arrival in Malaysia. Specifically, it investigates the social, economic and psychological conditions of 30 Palestinian families who are registered at the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) located in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia and waiting for resettlement in a third country after they fled from Iraq, Syria and the Gaza Strip. The present research is based on the qualitative approach, employing participant observation, in-depth interviews with families and interviews with officials for data collection. The findings confirm that the Palestinian families have been leading unstable living circumstances before and after their transition in Malaysia. Recent civil wars in Iraq and Syria as well as regular Israeli wars in the Gaza Strip exposed them to killing, kidnapping and home destruction, forcing them to flee for the safety of their lives. Their transition in Malaysia has brought about negative impacts on their family life. It affects all of their social aspects including relationships, health and education. Economically, the families face challenges in terms of meeting basic needs and are exploited at work places. Psychologically, they develop depression and anxiety. Finally, the study sheds light on the mechanisms the families adopt to overcome challenges during transition in Malaysia.

ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة تقديم صورة عامة عن حياة العائلة الفلسطينية، حيث المعيشة غير المستقرة والتي تمتد لما يقارب السبعة عقود، وتحديدًا منذ عام ١٩٤٨م والمسمى بعام النكبة والذي يعتبر تاريخيًا العام الذي أحدث تغييرًا جذريًا في حياة الفلسطينيين، والذين اعتادوا على العيش سكانًا أصليين في أراضيهم، ليصبحوا بعد عام النكبة مجرد لاجئين مشردين في دول عديدة حول العالم. وتتحرى الدراسة كيفية الإدراك والتصور الذاتي، بين مجموعة من الأسر الفلسطينية عن أنفسهم بوصفهم لاجئين يعيشون حالة من اللااستقرار وكيفية تعبيرهم عن ذواتهم في سياق حياة، ما قبل وبعد قدومهم لماليزيا . فالدراسة تتتبع حياة العائلة الفلسطينية غير المستقرة اجتماعيًا واقتصاديًا ونفسيًا، حيث تستخدم الدراسة الأسلوب النوعي؛ لدراسة عينة من الأسر الفلسطينية المكونة من٣٠ أسرة، لجأت لماليزيا للعيش المؤقت بوصفهم لاجئين، تحت حماية المفوضية السامية للأمم المتحدة لشئون اللاجئين، في العاصمة الماليزية كوالالمبور، حيث تنتظر تلك الأسر ردودًا إيجابية لإعادة توطينهم في دول أوروبية، بعد أن تم تهجيرهم من العراق وسوريا وقطاع غزة بفعل الحروب. وحيث إن الدراسة تستخدم الأسلوب النوعي، فإنما توظف أكثر من آلية لجمع البيانات المطلوبة، التي تتمثل في الملاحظة بالمشاركة، والمقابلات وجها لوجه مع أرباب الأسر ، ومقابلات مع مسئولين منهم السفير الفلسطيني في ماليزيا، وأحد مسئولي قضايا اللاجئين التابع لمفوضية الأمم المتحدة، حيث إنهما على اتصال مباشر مع تلك الأسر خلال حياتهم اليومية .تؤكد النتائج لهذه الدراسة على أن العائلة الفلسطينية تعيش حياة غير مستقرة، فترتى ما قبل وبعد وصولهم لماليزيا حيث الإقامة المؤقتة. فالحروب الأهلية الحالية في العراق وسوريا بالإضافة للحروب الإسرائيلية المتكررة على قطاع غزة، وما تخللها من عمليات قتل وخطف وتدمير للبيوت، أجبر تلك الأسر الفلسطينية على الهجرة من تلك الدول، لتنتقل للمعيشة غير المستقرة في ماليزيا حيث الإقامة غير الآمنة، والتي أثرت سلبًا على حياتهم الاجتماعية في جوانب متعددة مثل شبكة علاقاتهم، الجوانب الصحية والتعليمية، كما وأثرت على أوضاعهم الاقتصادية حيث أصبحوا يواجهوا تحديات كبيرة في توفير الحاجات الأساسية، مما جعلهم عرضة للاستغلال من أصحاب العمل. إضافة إلى ذلك فقد أثرت عليهم نفسيًا حيث أصبحوا عرضة للأمراض النفسية كالاكتئاب والقلق الدائم. إن هذه الدراسة تسلط الأضواء على التحديات التي تواجه الأسر الفلسطينية، وعلى كيفية تبنى تلك الأسر لآليات دفاعية، للتغلب على تلك التحديات خصوصًا خلال إقامتهم المؤقتة في ماليزيا.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of	of my own investigation, except
where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not	been previously or concurrently
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This thesis is dedicated to

the Palestinian nation which has been struggling with displacement for ages

and for all nations which are recently experiencing

refuge and displacement around the world

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GFI General Family Image

IIUMInternational Islamic University MalaysiaMSRIMalaysian Social Research InstituteNGONon-governmental OrganizationOICOrganization of Islamic CooperationPLOPalestinian Liberation OrganizationRDSRefugee Status Determination

UN United Nations

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNRWA United Nations Relief and Works Agency

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The family is a significant segment of the human society. Fit family means a strong society while sick family refers to a disintegrated and undermined one. Throughout the last century and for almost seventy years, the Palestinian family has been experiencing challenges and confrontations (Al-krenawi & Kimberley, 2014). The catastrophe of 1948, which the Palestinians commonly call *Nakba*, was a turning point in their own history when the whole Palestinian society came under the Israeli occupation rooting out hundreds of thousands of families and transferring them to different countries to live as refugees¹ in humiliating exile camps (Farah, 2013). From that year up to the present, the Palestinian society has fully grown in an abnormal atmosphere that negatively affects the whole society, including the family which constitutes the heart of it socially, economically, politically and psychologically (Shemesh, 2004).

The Palestinian society exists in social turmoil and has attracted the attention of social scientists. A large number of studies have been conducted to study the family in transition in different societies around the world and they mainly focus on how the socio-economic changes have affected the family throughout history, especially in the last century after the industrial revolution. Skolnick and Skolnick (2003) discuss the

.

¹ According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005, p.1271), a refugee is "a person who has been forced to leave their country or home, because there is a war or for political, religious or social reasons" while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 1951 convention and its 1967 protocol defines a refugee as "a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him— or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution".

transition and changes that took place in the American family and focus on the economic transformations after the industrial development of the 20th century affected the social life in general and the family structure in particular. As a result, social institutions such as marriage, divorce, sexuality and motherhood have experienced global changes, shaping family life and causing members of the family to adopt them during their life cycle. They consider such changes as influential and lead to the social stability of the family.

Many studies as mentioned in the literature have expressed concerns about the Palestinian family. However, none of them has focused on the Palestinian family in transition. In fact, the Palestinian society has been living in a big contradiction between the theoretical existence of the Palestinian family and its gradual disappearance in the real social life to form a mature society. This contradiction can be attributed to the impact of the political struggle in the Palestinian society which negatively influences economically, the Palestinian family socially psychologically and transforms it into a situation mainly characterized by instability (Bornstein, 2008). The significant issue of the abnormal situation created by the Palestinian Israeli conflict is described by Rowley and Taylor (2006) who referred to the United Nations' statistics that about 750,000 Palestinians were dismissed to different countries following the 1948 catastrophe.

Table 1.1 shows the number of Palestinians who were displaced to different Arab countries including the Gaza Strip and the West Bank during the 1948 war.

Table 1.1 Displacement of Palestinians to Arab countries

Country / Region	Number of Palestinian Refugees
West Bank	280,000
Gaza	190,000
Jordan	70,000
Syria	75,000
Lebanon	100,000
Iraq	4,000
Egypt	7,000
Total	726,000

Source: Rowley and Taylor (2006)

Table 1.2 shows the number of the Palestinians who were displaced from the West Bank to Jordan during the 1967 war. Rowley and Taylor (2006) demonstrate how these refugees settled in refugee camps and how this number that began in 1948 with less than a million persons has reached more than six million, spreading all around the world. Needless to say, the Israeli occupation in 1948 was the main force of change resulting in the majority of the Palestinians being tagged as refugees in separated countries.

Table 1.2 Displacement of Palestinians from the West Bank to Jordan in the 1967 war

Country	Number of Palestinian Refugees
Jordan	300,000

Source: Rowley and Taylor (2006)



Figure 1.1 Map of the Disappearing of the State of Palestine from 1946 to 2012 Source: palestineawarenesscoalition.wordpress.com

A significant part of the present study focuses on understanding the real situation of transition that the Palestinian family is presently experiencing. The researcher investigates a recent phenomenon of displacement among Palestinian families who used to live in Iraq, Syria and the Gaza Strip but have moved to Malaysia² where they registered at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to seek asylum in a third country. The study examines to what extent these families experience instability before as well as after arriving in Malaysia.

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² Recently, the Malaysian policy of providing "upon arrival visa" has attracted a great number of Palestinian families looking for better life conditions particularly after the political turmoil in Palestine as well as some Middle Eastern countries. Those who cannot get a student visa or work permit while in Malaysia start to register at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). By doing so, they get an "appointment card" by which they get an appointment to be interviewed by a UNHCR officer to organize them a shelter in the United States or any other Western countries. In this context, it is important to refer that the appointment card grants them a kind of legal stay in Malaysia as a transit country.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Life of displacement and transition involves challenging living conditions that have tremendous consequences on the family and family life. Historically, Palestinian family has been experiencing transition with uncertainty and instability. Recently, a significant number of Palestinian families have come to Malaysia as a transitional destination in the hopes of finding security until UNHCR organizes their resettlement in different countries.

General family image (GFI) is significant to evaluate the quality of one's family life. It is closely related to social comparison through which individuals obtain certain assessment or perception of their own family life using internal and external standards as well as rational and irrational thinking to compare to others (Moin & Sharlin, 2006).

In the present study, GFI explains how Palestinians see and interpret family and family life; which circumstances control the ways in which they mentally depict their own and other's family and how they adopt various actions for dealing with the stressful incidents of family life in the Malaysian social environment.

Besides, the study focuses on the general family image among Palestinian families in terms of the importance of family as a life value, closeness, mutual assistance, role division, childrearing and relations between generations. The quality of family life, satisfaction with family life and family strain are also investigated. The research examines personal characteristics such as divorce and depression as well as the person-environment fit including the socioeconomic adjustment.

It is significant to mention that GFI has various purposes such as providing individuals with a sense of awareness to attain stability and well-being. In addition, it

influences the emotions and behaviours that lead to new understanding of the realities of family life (Moin & Sharlin, 2006).

A Palestinian family in transition is living in uncertain conditions. As a result, its GFI undergoes change and consequently affects the pattern of family life. It is thus interesting to find out the GFI of Palestinian families in Malaysia before and after their transition and its impact on the quality of family life, personal characteristics and personal-environmental life. Accordingly, the present study attempts to fill the gap of knowledge by exploring the challenges the Palestinian family faces and explaining the general family image articulated by members of the Palestinian family in transition and its struggle to survive.

The present case study is based on a sample of 30 Palestinian families coming from Iraq, Syria and the Gaza Strip. The findings show that these families have been living in instability and uncertainty before and after coming to Malaysia where they also live in transition as refuges under the protections of UNHCR waiting for resettlement in a third country. Meanwhile, the families are facing tremendous challenges socially, economical and psychologically. Finally, the study discusses how the families adopt certain mechanisms to overcome living difficulties during transition in Malaysia.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

From one socio-historical phase to another, the human family is exposed to transitions. Such transitions have long been considered as positive to enhance the family's position social, economic and psychological position (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2003). Interestingly, family transition in the Palestinian case points to the negative

side of changes interrelated to uncertainty - socially, economically and psychologically - particularly after the Palestinian people were sent to different countries around the world.

The significance of the present research lies in providing insights related to the image of the Palestinian family in transition.

- It is a new trend in studies on the family to explore the image of the Palestinian family in transition.
- ii. It explains the impact of transition on the nature of the Palestinian family including its patterns and functions.
- iii. Besides, the result of the study will be a fruitful addition to the corpus of sociological knowledge as well as an important contribution to the families that stay in transition in different societies around the world.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1. What is the general family image (GFI) that Palestinian families develop before and after their transition to Malaysia?
- 2. What is the impact of the general family image (GFI) on the pattern of family life, quality of family life, personal characteristics and personenvironment fit?
- 3. What are the ways of coping used by Palestinian families to improve their quality of life during their transition in Malaysia?