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## CULTURES OF WOMANHOOD IN ISRAEL: SOCIAL AGENCIES AND GENDER PRODUCTION

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**Synopsis** – Feminist academic research in Israel has followed the footsteps of nonfeminist Israeli social research. Both are preoccupied with questions of identity of this new society and its subjects. Yet, as we wish to show, the authors of this issue choose to do so in alternative manners. Their thematic and methodological choices reveal the neglected challenges taken for granted and mark the power and limitations of current feminist research in Israel. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

### FROM THE TOP OF MOUNT SCOPUS, TO LOCAL CLEAVAGES

It was the end of winter 1994, days when the Mediterranean sun is still soft. We thus decided to invite our guests, a group of academic women from the Britain and Ireland, to lunch on the balcony of the staff cafeteria at the Hebrew University campus on Mount Scopus. When we opened the restaurant door and went out to the balcony, the familiar yet ever-breathtaking landscape of Jerusalem stretched out before us. Far below one could clearly see the old city with its minarets, churches, and the wall surrounding the crowded houses. Extending from the wall right to the edge of the balcony was the Palestinian East City of Jerusalem, whereas next to it, and on the mountain across — the Western Jewish city. From the height of the balcony one can picture, at times you utilize this special observation point to recount the city's history, while at other times this tranquil scene is deconstructed under your gaze into the manifold social, religious, cultural, and political cleavages tormenting the city and its inhabitants, symbolizing Israeli society as a whole.

Around the dining table conversation flowed. We had spent the morning surveying research and discussing the state of Women's Studies in our countries. In the course of our discussion, we — Israeli feminist scholars from the *Program for Gender Differences in Society* and

feminist scholars from a variety of academic institutions in Britain, Northern Ireland, and the Irish Republic — discovered once again how similar are the questions preoccupying women in the academy all over the world.

Nevertheless, the encounter also reinforced our crucial sense of the differences between various groups of women, the local significance of feminism within each society and each historical context, and the problematic nature inherent in the notion of female solidarity. We found mutual interest in the dilemma arising from the tension between feminism and religion, in the gap between feminist theory and practice, and in the discussion between Women's Studies and Gender Studies about naming our work.

The easy communication between us resulted from the regular contact maintained by Israeli feminist scholars with the Western world of knowledge — both as consumers and as contributors. Yet, such an academic relationship is not without its problems, for it entails a translation from one language to another, from one mode of existence to another, from one world to another.

One of the outcomes of that gathering on the balcony was the invitation we received from Claire Duchon, one of the editors of *Women Studies International Forum*, to edit this special issue; an issue which in any case serves as another chapter in that very same relationship,

which relies on the features common to feminist research everywhere, and on the differences stemming from the various contexts in which it takes place.

In deciding on the kind of issue we wanted to prepare, we could have chosen many routes. We particularly wanted to avoid presenting women and feminism in Israeli society as representatives of key subcultures. We did not want to reproduce existing divisions between newcomers and veterans, or label women according to religion, nationality, ethnicity, and so on. We, therefore, opted to issue a call for papers. We would have liked to receive essays from Palestinian writers, whether Israeli citizens or inhabitants of the Occupied Territories, from Russian and Ethiopian newcomers, as well as from religious scholars and political activists — but we did not. The fact that we looked for academic writing (in English) was in itself a process of inclusion/exclusion of which we are well aware. We received essays dealing with the lives of women in nearly all these groups, but most of them were not written by women from within these communities. To complement the range of articles generated by the open call for papers, we invited two female political activists to write short contributions for the issue. Galia Golan, a political scientist, active in the Israeli Left, has described her field of activity, as has Nabila Espanioly, a Palestinian sociologist active in the field of domestic violence. Both are recipients of the Alice Shalvi Award for Women Leadership, by the New Israeli Fund. We thought it inappropriate to subsume Palestinian women into the Israeli canopy since they are entitled to separate representation, although the subject of life side-by-side in a land of discord, under conditions of conflict and occupation, echoes through this issue. Much time has passed since that pleasant meal on the balcony, and it seems that a current gaze from the same observation point has become even more complicated. During the time that has passed since then, the peace process has accelerated, yet Prime Minister Rabin's assassination in November 1995 and the change of government in May 1996, has strongly emphasized the ruptures within Israeli culture, as well as between the latter and Palestinian society. The studies presented in this issue explore these ruptures, their sources, courses, and expressions, from feminist points of view.

Beyond the encounter with our feminist academic writing, we would like to lead the for-

eign reader through a journey in which s/he will unveil the multiple faces of Israeli womanhood. At the end of this voyage, we hope s/he will be able to grasp the "Israeliness" of the Israeli woman. Our editorial role, as we perceive it, is to foreground the local scene. We assume that though the experience of becoming and being a woman in Israel is by no means unique or exceptional, its specificity and attributes can only be understood by de-constructing the qualities of the local, historical, and socio-cultural arenas that constitute and perpetuate gender/power relations.

### GROWING FEMINISM IN AN UNFRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

This specific place — the state, society and culture sustained in the "Land of Israel" since the foundation of the Zionist-Jewish settlement at the end of the 19th century — has not served as fertile ground for the development of feminism. The transition from the Yishuv period (Jewish society in pre-state Israel, 1948) to a national state of immigrants did not make a considerable change in this reality. Nevertheless, throughout its existence thus far, Israeli society has seen ceaseless attempts to produce a feminist discourse, bring it to public awareness, root it within the disciplines of legislation and law, and through it affect the labour market, the media, politics, and the private lives of women.

Feeding on Socialist-egalitarian notions, the revolutionary-Zionist movement sought to create a new, modern, and advanced society. Moreover, it did not tolerate those who attempted to point out its shortcomings. Any theoretical or practical challenge to the consensus was perceived as a direct threat to the nation building project. This project held, as it were, prospects for liberation and equality for the Jewish groups and individuals who took part in it. Under the wings of Zionist ideology, all those participating in its actualization, both men and women, were supposed to achieve self-realization (Bernstein, 1992). Such total ideology promised to eliminate differences of social class, gender, and ethnicity within the framework of the new, modern Jewish society in the Land of Israel. The spirit of the revolution failed to recognize separate categories of women or ethnic groups; all were ostensibly equal sons and daughters of the revolution. In reality, the preoccupation with

national construction and defense gave precedence to male actors and a "male" discourse, making it harder (often intentionally) for women to become equal participants in those fields of activity that became highly prestigious. Women who did take part in military and construction activities found themselves in marginal nonprestigious positions, or were eventually pushed to domestic or familial roles. Furthermore, the Zionist revolution, with all its innovations, did not undo the association between woman, home, and family (except for a short while upon the foundation of the first *Kibbutzim*). The traditional role distribution between men and women was not seriously challenged despite the increasing participation of women in the labor market.

When the State of Israel was founded in 1948, women's social marginality was established. The laws of matrimony were entrusted to the religious establishment, which (in the absence of a constitution and a civil marriage/divorce in Israel) became exclusively responsible for issues pertaining to marriage and divorce. Israeli society continued to support the Jewish tradition, which regards the family as a cornerstone in the nation's construction. The military activities were institutionalized upon the founding of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in 1948. By law, both men and women are recruited to the army, though it offers substantial opportunities for promotion and accrual of power only for men. The fact that women play a secondary role in managing the national military conflict pushes them to the margins of society, silencing their voices. In a place where the public sphere is dedicated to national tasks, it is hard to gain legitimacy for individual and collective demands. Any attempt on the part of women to sound their voice is hushed and scorned in the name of the national collective's existential needs. Thus, the combination and accumulation of various types of patriarchy (religious, military, national, political) do not offer an ideal base for the emergence of feminism.

Nonetheless, throughout this period, in this unwelcoming atmosphere, various women's groups and organizations, as well as individual women, have attempted to sound their voices and act in order to actualize the promise of equality, and to challenge male domination.

### FEMINISM IN ACADEMIA: FROM WOMEN IN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS TO LOCAL WOMANHOOD

Until the beginning of the 1960s, the centres of activity in women's issues were in the political field and in various women's organizations and groups. Thereafter, the academy has become a significant field of action in constituting feminist discourse. Precisely in the academy, which from its outset was part of the Zionist discourse, spaces emerged for criticizing the latter, including feminist criticism. The roots of feminist discourse in the academy are nourished both from within and from without. Israeli research has always been alert to what happens in the Western world; some of the scholars have been raised and/or studied in Western universities, and the academic establishment in Israel has always been umbilically linked to those in Europe and America. This enables a flow of feminist ideas from the West to Israel, as well as Israeli participation in international discourse. The local revolutionary tradition, despite its failure to produce the promised gender equality, created a set of expectations, a few models of successful women, and a public sphere that is not devoid of women. Thus, gradually, the global feminist revolution infiltrated Israeli existence. Academic feminism is part of this move (Azmon & Izraeli, 1993).

Currently, all five main Israeli universities have programs for Women and Gender Studies. The milestones leading up to these can be found in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when feminist research was chiefly engaged in the examination of women's status employing a liberal feminist perspective. As such, it dealt with questions pertaining to women's roles and the differences between the sexes in conventional research fields, such as the labour market, the family, the army, sex stereotypes, and education (Swirski & Safia, 1991). The principal goal was to expose the inequality between the sexes and the failure of the egalitarian ethos. The significance of these studies, as was the case in early Western feminism, lay in the uncovering of institutional discrimination and the introduction of gender as a category for social research, without breaking up the category of women into subcultures. The initial research was mostly quantitative, and did not develop alternative methodology and writing that are attentive to women's lives and experiences. This has gradually changed since the

1980s, when research started to assume richer and more diverse facets, both from a disciplinary point of view, and with regard to its subjects and the research and writing methods employed. As to the prevalent theoretical trends in current feminist research, the tendency to deal with Israeli culture and society from a critical, subversive position is clear. Studies are engaged in deconstructing the self-evident, this time from feminist perspectives, while using diverse theoretical approaches. Radical Feminism, like Orthodox Marxism, has not taken root in the academic mainstream despite the fact that it is often regarded as a radical touchstone. In the past few years we have witnessed a number of parallel trends: a growing tendency to study women of non-hegemonic groups (i.e., Oriental and religious women) in an attempt to deconstruct that which is taken for granted from the subversive standpoint of women. Feminist cultural criticism in the fields of art, cinema, and literature tends to go along this line, showing how words, images, and representations play a part in, and negotiate, the reproduction of gender. Another body of critical research evolves from the historical-sociological and literary analysis of the function of pre-state ideological, social, and economic constitutive power in shaping the identity of Israeli women. These changes encouraged a methodological shift toward qualitative research, as was and is the case in most feminist research (Israel Social Studies Research, 1997).

### FRESH LOOKS AT OLD ISSUES

It is interesting to note that most feminist research revolves around the cardinal dilemmas preoccupying Israeli society. Readers of this issue, written by and about women, will be introduced to the history of Zionism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the social classes and ethnic structure, religion-state relations, the army, and the family. Yet, the viewpoints embedded in this issue refuse to be swallowed up in the routine of research. They open up new and original doors through which one can look at the same dilemmas. They continue the tradition of the Israeli academy, which is preoccupied with questions of identity and with delineating the image of the new society, but shift the "female" point of view from the margins to the centre.

The Israeli army, for example, is examined through its point of failure — captivity. In this

issue, Amia Lieblich listens to voices of wives of prisoners of war. The theme of heroism, usually studied through successful military operations and the participating heroic men, is studied here through a double shift: a shift to failure, namely, captivity, and a shift to the wife of the absent hero.

The religious establishment with its variations, and religion-state relations are explored through the methods of management they employ on women and their bodies. Niza Yanay and Tamar Rapoport focus on Jewish instruction pamphlets for the cleansing and purification of the female body as texts that expose the interests of patriarchy. Subject matters such as sanctification, purity, and religious rituals are examined through the ways in which they are applied to women's bodies. Tamar El-Or deals with ultraorthodox women, illuminating another aspect in the problematic nature of Orthodox life within a modern society. The intricate dialogue of this society with modernism and secularism is transferred to women's bodies, in an obsessive discourse of modesty addressed mainly to women. The Zionist enterprise and its impressive realization in the establishment of the kibbutz society is deciphered through women's representation in museums in the smaller settlements. Tamar Katriel chose to observe museum instructors, focusing on the manner in which they reconstruct and narrate the gendered Zionist ethos. Women's place in history is examined through the way in which they have been positioned in the museum and through the text describing their place there. As an agricultural society, there has always been work on the kibbutz for both genders, but the urban segment of the socialist pioneer group had to struggle for employment. Deborah Bernstein analyses a seemingly marginal debate on the theme of "couples' work" conducted in the mid-1930s in view of the unemployment problem. Analysis of the rhetoric regarding women's autonomous status and their right to keep their jobs even if their husbands were working reveals the gendered preconceptions of the workers unions. Thus a door is opened to the priorities of these then-powerful unions.

The transition from a pioneering revolutionary society to a democratic country, and the citizens' status in this new land, are also examined through the feminist prism. Nitza Berkovitch performs a close reading of Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) discussions on the first two

laws pertaining to the status of women. Focusing on women's civil status, this opened door sheds light on the problematic nature of civil equality within a nation-state, exposing the hidden checklist of values that a person must complete in order to become a citizen.

The common conflation of woman and mother is examined by shifting the attention from the customary to the alternative. Two essays explore this connection precisely where women seek to deconstruct it, or where they fail to re-construct it. Delila Amir and Orly Benjamin look into discussions held by abortion approval committees. Their analysis exposes the professional practices operated on the Israeli woman who wishes not to be a "mother." Ruth Ginsburg traces the transformations of the "Jewish mother" within the history of Hebrew literature. The romanticism attached to the Jewish mother is examined by a reading of texts written by women about women, exposing the burden inherent in the association between woman and mother in the Jewish-Israeli context, and lingering on its literary expressions, which involve madness, alienation, and cruelty.

The feminist door in this issue is also opened to the ethnic rupture that ceaselessly preoccupies Israeli society, undermining the illusions of a melting pot and the people's unity. Doli Ben Habib touches upon the broader questions of this rupture; the relations between local colonialism (ethnic) and global colonialism (national), reading them through the eyes of a female Jewish Israeli writer (Jacqueline Kahanov) of Egyptian origin, who encounters Palestinian women after the 1967 War. Feminist research in the state of Israel tends, then, to deal with the "big questions," but it strives to do so in alternative channels. These intensify that which is considered secondary, questioning the obviously "important." In this respect, local research is similar to feminist research elsewhere. Yet, feminist research in Israel refuses to part with the major research areas (nationality, religion, ethnicity, law, and family) and with the attempt to find their local significance. Perhaps this is why typical feminist fields, such as domestic violence, rape, single-parent families, women's health, etc. were not extensively explored in early feminist research; only recently have these issues received regular attention, although they are more and more frequently on the public agenda. This agenda is constructed by the hard and persistent work of a few grass-

roots activists, and an even smaller number of political activists. Feminist discourse in society as a whole, as well as in art, literature, and the labour market, is gradually expanding. Despite the attempts to impede, restrict, or underestimate it, the public academic activity of feminist scholars played a part in this expansion. The current issue holds some of the fruits of the scholarship produced by this community.

### AGENCIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF GENDER CATEGORIES

Womanhood in Israel is by no means a uniform experience, and the category of Israeli women is not homogeneous. Delving into the articles in this issue reveals that this is a common point of departure leading each scholar to examine a specific aspect of the relations between womanhood and gender. A repeated reading of the articles indicates that despite the different paths taken by the scholars, in effect all are engaged in an identification of the social agencies interested in producing and reproducing the category of gender. These social agencies are preoccupied with a translation of ethos and ideologies, religious and familial codes, ethnic and national stereotypes. They translate, process, and weave them into the woman's daily life, into her body, into her place in the labour market, into the depths of her soul, into the law that determines her civil status. Each agency alone, and all together, includes gender relations as part of its signification, supervision, disciplining, and policing activities. The religious, the military, and the professional-medical establishments, the labour unions, the parliament, and the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi cultures together cover the field of production and reproduction of gender relations in Israeli culture. The totality indicates that in no field is there indifference to gender relations, and that the process of their production and reproduction by these agencies is endless. These agencies, which in Israel are identified with the overriding goals of the public as a whole, usually enjoy the "cooperation" of women, who find it difficult to rebel against the basic values that are translated by the agencies. Feminist protest and resistance against Israeli "sacred cows" are still in their infancy.

We dedicate the last part of this introduction to the link exposed between the nature of the social agencies and the gender production in which they are engaged. In other words, how

the work of translation done by the agency materializes into sets of expectations from and images of women: the ideal Israeli woman, the Jewish mother, the devoted pioneer, the soldier's wife, and the industrious worker; how these agencies mark the borders of the female body, its placement, and displacement between the public and the domestic spheres.

The order in which the essays are presented traces the routes offered to women for joining the public collective. The link between the social agencies and the representations of women they produce uncovers their demands of the woman. These present her as an individual who is forever a part of the whole "female gender," who must obey certain codes in order to become part of the collective. The path into the heart of the nation and away from it goes through the universal route of marriage and motherhood. The local plan of this route is revealed in the essays.

### ENTRY TICKETS TO THE COLLECTIVE: PRICE LIST

As agencies, the parliament, the army, and the labour unions perceive a woman's status through her roles as wife and mother. In the pre-state period, as shown by Bernstein, the socialist women's organizations indeed attempted to differentiate between a woman's autonomous status and her wifeness. Those attempts filtered into the rhetorical level, but received meagre practical expression. Moreover, with the establishment of the State, as shown by Berkovitch, there was not much left of the alternative discourse concerning women's autonomous status. The first two laws pertaining to women, which were passed in the Israeli parliament justified granting them an equal civil status on account of their being actual or potential mothers.

Another path for joining the Israeli nation and its tasks is offered to women through their function as soldiers' mothers or wives. Amia Lieblich shows that the wife of a prisoner of war is expected to demonstrate her loyalty to the nation by eternally waiting for her hero's return, while continuing to perform her duties in the domestic sphere as mother and homemaker. As long as she behaves as the wife of the missing hero, she enjoys the caring embrace of the military and political establishments. Hebrew literature written by women conducts a dialogue

with this inevitable motherhood. Ginsburg, who examined the cliché of the "Jewish mother," shows how this image now undergoes literalization *ad absurdum*. It seems that only nowadays, and only in the world of fiction, can the necessary link between the woman and the mother be deconstructed, exposing the cruelty it conceals both with regard to the mother and with regard to her children, as long as their relations are appropriated in favour of external forces.

Three of the essays analyse a didactic, pedagogical, religious and medical discourse that demands of women to show responsibility, awareness, and intentionality concerning the management of their bodies. In these cases the woman is bound to the collective through her body and womb. Amir and Benjamin demonstrate how the professional members of the abortion approval committees silence the public problem of abortions by transferring the responsibility of the unwanted pregnancy to the woman. The normative Israeli woman who deserves to be included in the orderly society is one who manages to avoid unwanted pregnancies and abortions alike. Yanay and Rapoport deal with the religious practice of ritual impurity, which regulates sex life in the Jewish family. They show how the religious establishment seeks to "transplant" its own voice within women's cognitive and moral systems. This patriarchal voice casts the responsibility for the body and its preparation for sexual intercourse and procreation that will guarantee pure descendants on the woman. Thus, through her "pure body" and her "innocent children" the woman can find her way into the Jewish public. The ultraorthodox community is engaged in tying the woman to its own collective and removing her from the Zionist secular one. El-Or demonstrates how the pedagogical power of the social agencies within the ultraorthodox community poses the "modest Jewish body" as a favoured alternative over the "free modern body." Women are moralized to constitute a covered, restrained, and concealed body, while it moves through town, seeing, hearing, and interpreting. Such a body is the entry ticket to the right collective, and an insurance policy against the temptations of the available alternative collective.

Unlike the religious community, which seeks to affix the woman within her home and body, the kibbutz discourse (the height of the Zionist dream) expected the woman to "act like a man." Yet, in order to gain recognition and prestige, and occupy a place within the public

sphere, she had to leave the kibbutz, her "home," a practically nonrealistic move. Reading the texts of guided tours given in Israeli settlement museums, which are located in kibbutzim, Katriel exposes this "double-talk." Through humorous language and sexual insinuations, while demeaning the image of women on the one hand, and glorifying them on the other, the guide-mediators recreate the chief patriarchal story of equality between the sexes during the Yishuv period. Thus, via mythological women from history, the path of contemporary women into society is paved. The mythological history of Zionism was strongly connected to Ashkenazic (Jews of European origin) identity. Thus, the way into the society was mediated by ethnic relations as well. Ben Habib deals with the ethnic colonialism of *Ashkenazim* regarding *Mizrahim* by analysing a collection of short stories by a Jewish woman writer of Egyptian origin. To this type of colonialism she adds two more layers: the colonialism practiced by the State of Israel regarding the Palestinian population (in the Territories that were occupied in 1967), and the colonialism of the Western Christian world in the Middle East, which left its impressions on her during her childhood in Egypt. All these colonial layers are etched on the woman's body and in her memory. These memories stand between her and any attempt to belong to one of the collectives. We have noted that local feminist research has insisted upon remaining within the main thematic circle. It has not changed the general academic agenda. Rather, it has shifted points of view, hierarchies, subjects, etc. Alongside, feminist research in Israel is preoccupied with the price exacted from women who wish to become part of the collective. Participating in it, in the sense of belonging and being recognized, but also in the sense of changing the collective, resisting its patriarchy, sabotaging its activities, and making its heterogeneity seen, heard, and accepted. Such work brings us back to the "agencies." The chief social agencies in Israel — the army, parliament, the labour unions, education system, the medical, and even religious establishments — have undergone many changes during Israel's 50 years of existence thus far. New laws have been passed concerning the status of women as autonomous citizens; the courts of law and

the media reveal a certain measure of sensitivity to discrimination against women and abuse of their bodies; the labour market has become more variegated, new opportunities have opened up for young women who are recruited to the army; women constitute more than half of the students in Israeli higher education institutions, and even the orthodox education for girls and women has been revolutionized. However, it seems that the lack of solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the lack of separation between religion and state, and the preservation of the familial Jewish tradition make it hard to turn the Israeli environment into one that is friendly to feminism.

Even if we claimed that the work of all the social agencies is aimed at reproducing gender relations, obviously they cannot be unified, and the differences between them cannot be effaced. Feminist thought should be attentive to the specific qualities of each and every agency, and must not be tempted to perceive them only through the power they exercise and their resulting dominance. It should also consider the limits of its exertion: the flexibility of these agencies, their tendency to change their modes of operation, the social context to which they are committed. All these directly and indirectly affect the chances for change in gender relations. Whether this change is characterized by extending women's participation in the public sphere and in powerful positions, or by affixation or regression. Following a remark made by a feminist visitor (and perhaps due to the spirit of the times), the museum at Kibbutz Yifat, for example, set up a corner dedicated to women's status in the kibbutz. This move requires a change in the guide's rhetoric, and the story s/he relates. Undoubtedly, the democratic tradition of the kibbutz, its political views and communal ethos of equality render the boundaries of its discourse more flexible, allowing a certain measure of criticism. Orthodox society, on the other hand, seems to have built for itself a systematic tactics of response to its surrounding. Similarly, they exhibit attentiveness, study, and keep abreast of *Zeitgeists*, yet this is not aimed at adapting to the changes, but rather at adapting these changes to the life of the community. However, this does not imply that the lives of women in the kibbutz have changed considerably, or that the lives of

Orthodox women have remained as they were, since there is no clear monovalent link between the agencies' operations and women's experiences. In order to examine more accurately the chances and directions of changes that are going to occur in women's lives it is not enough to characterize the social agencies; one must also examine the processes of negotiating conducted between these agencies and society, and between these and women, as have the writers in this issue.

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