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EDITOR'S NOTE



FOR SEVERAL MONTHS NOW, I have been editing the papers of 24 women working in different fields and in different places throughout the world. These women also come from very different parts of the Jewish community and work in a variety of settings: some are academics; some are writers; some are social workers. All originally presented papers in 1997 and 1998 at the Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women located at Brandeis University. Reading their work, thinking about their ideas, and sometimes struggling to translate them into English has been an unexpectedly absorbing experience for me and I've wondered what it is, exactly, that I find so rewarding. I've concluded that spending time in the company of an international, interdisciplinary group of Jewish women begins to fill a most basic and persistent need in me: the need of human beings to see themselves sympathetically represented and reflected in their culture.

As a Jewish woman growing up in post-war America, I rarely saw any semblance of my reflection in the mainstream culture. Although I grew up in the middle of New York City where almost everybody in my immediate world was Jewish, representations of Jews were absent from the museums I visited, the movies I saw, or the books I read in school. Except for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which I consider problematic reading for a young Jewish girl, there was no Jewish heroine in the books of my childhood. I identified with active, adventurous girls like Jo March, Nancy Drew or Cherry Ames and liked reading about the dramatic lives of European and English queens. I didn't then notice that none of the women I was reading about were Jewish, or that Archie and Veronica seemed to have no Jewish friends; that there were no Jewish Mouseketeers; or that there were no Jewish girls in *American Girl* or *Seventeen*.

I was in my forties and listening to West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid speaking at the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston, when I suddenly perceived their absence (like Pnina Motzafi-Haller in her essay about *mizrahi* women in Israel, I applied the insight of an African-American woman to my own life). Jamaica Kincaid had done a brilliant and audacious thing: invited to choose her favorite painting at the museum and speak to a large audience about the reasons for her choice, she had beamed an old snapshot of her mother on the museum's large screen and talked about it.

All of us in the audience, of course, had been accustomed to viewing the parade of art history on such a screen – from the Greeks to the Renaissance masters to the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists. We were accustomed to oil portraits and elaborately framed photographs. The effect of Kinkaid's snapshot was shocking and made the author's point more forcefully than her words: Had we ever seen the image of an ordinary West Indian woman on the walls of a museum? Had we ever contemplated her face? Her body? Her surroundings? Her life? How did we ascribe value to this snapshot when it was viewed in a private photo album, in a newspaper, or here, in the context of other portraits in the museum? We had all read or at least heard of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but what about the invisible woman? In this case, what about an entire sub-culture usually hidden by the majority African-American minority culture?

I viewed many of these working papers as such snapshots that raised some of these and many other questions.

In addition to experiencing a kind of invisibility as a Jewish girl in America, I also felt an invisibility in the Jewish community as the daughter of Czech Jews (of *ashkenazi* descent on my mother's side; *sephardi* on my father's). We lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where there were many Jewish refugees from Central Europe but where the definition of Jewish culture was determined by people who, like the majority of American Jews, were of Russian and Polish descent.

This particular group, I later learned, had jettisoned their working-class, Yiddish-speaking parents (as well as their working-class culture) in the Bronx, or Brooklyn, or Queens, or the Lower East Side.

They were West Siders now, middle-class, highly educated, new Jews, who frequented the American – not Yiddish-language – theater and Lincoln Center, collected art, read the cultural sections of the *Times* and the *New Yorker*. The men worked as professionals; the women were delighted to be full-time homemakers in the image of Betty Crocker. Most were political liberals who had flirted with Communism or Socialism in college; they had friends or acquaintances who were blacklisted and were deeply affected by McCarthyism. They had also been deeply affected by the events of the second world war and were in every way invested in a prototypically 1950s American mainstream lifestyle.



My family entered this Upper West Side Jewish milieu towards the end of 1948 like creatures from another planet. My parents were *both* Holocaust survivors and political exiles from Communism. They had grown up middle-class, did not speak Yiddish, had never seen a bagel, and were not especially interested in Israel. Although they had no sympathy for McCarthyism, they were staunch anti-Communists who regarded Stalin as another version of Hitler. During the 1950s, they struggled to earn money and to adjust to America. Like many Jewish (and other) refugee women, my mother supported the family. My father – a former Olympic water polo player and sometimes officer of the Organization of Czech Sportsmen in-Exile-in-the Western World – was mostly unemployed until I was ten years old.

All this is to say that, as I was growing up, I felt as invisible in the Jewish community as I did in the American one. And when I had finished growing up, although I was counted as an American Jew, I still did not feel like American Jewish culture included me. G.B. could have been describing the Epsteins when she writes “Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews know nothing about them... The Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all arriving Jews regardless of their background. This ashkenazi standard for Jews is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society.”

The issue of cultural hegemony is addressed in an even more dramatic way by South African Sally Frankental. “It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located,” she writes. “In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa... the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish



spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans' lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities." All this, of course, shaped the lives of South African Jewish women.

In reading these papers, I was struck by how many kinds of Jewish women there are, how profoundly we are influenced by our country of origin and the continuity or discontinuity of Jewish life within its borders, and by our experience of such factors as entitlement, dislocation, prejudice and outsider status. History, particularly this century's history, has not treated all Jewish women equally. In writing their papers, some authors – like Katalin Talyigas of Hungary – was reconnecting to and reconstructing the history of Jews in their country for the first time. Others, like Micaela Procaccia, who lives in Rome, is steeped in her history and writes with the surety of long immersion in the past: "In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match," begins her paper. "The day before the *qiddushin*, or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: "I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him." She declared herself to be "the unhappiest of all women," and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let "the *qiddushin* become *nissu'in*.' Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife."

The biographical section of this volume itself makes for fascinating reading – as much for the wide geographical spectrum represented as for the facts each woman deemed important to include. As different as each woman is, I find much in common with her. It was easy for me to enter into her world.

Although this first HRIJW collection of writing by Jewish women around the world is inevitably uneven and incomplete, it is a respectable beginning. The authors represented here are, in some countries, part of a larger scholarly and cultural project of researching and writing about women's lives; in others, they are pioneers – the first of their kind. In some countries, they have been able to draw on a large body of data and literature; in others, they are themselves creating that data and literature. Ana Lebl from Split (now in Croatia) lives in an aging and relatively poor community of only 100 Jews

with scarce resources; Americans Riv-Ellen Prell and Pamela Nadell enjoy the support of Jewish Studies as well as Women's Studies departments at major American universities. Our Israeli and Latin American contributors bring both these realities into yet another perspective.

Some of the authors chose to spend time reworking their original presentations; others were content to have published what they originally presented. Many have struggled to express themselves in English – their second or third or fourth language. As a writer who has often had to communicate in foreign languages, I admire their pluck; as editor, I hope they forgive my journalistic bias, my many questions, and my inadvertent mistakes. Parts of all their work – even where it represents a starting point – moved and inspired me. I hope it will move and inspire you.

Helen Epstein

October, 1999

MIZRAHI WOMEN IN ISRAEL: THE DOUBLE ERASURE

by Pnina Motzafi-Haller

A *mizrahi* feminist friend who heard me say that I planned to review the literature on *mizrahi* women in Israel suggested that I read Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*.¹ As I read about the rich intellectual tradition of African-American women and the words and ideas of Black feminist thinkers like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and Bell Hooks, I realized that hardly any theorized work which explores the intersections of gender, ethnicity and class had been produced in Israel. I also came to realize how *mizrahi* women's intellectual work has been suppressed, and made virtually invisible until very recently. There are some beginnings, a few articles published in the more progressive academic literature and, more often, internally-circulated essays. I would like to shed some light on this emerging discourse, but before doing this I wish to pose two questions: first, why is there such a small, little-known body of work that places *mizrahi* women at its center? Second, why is it emerging only in the past four or five years?



Part of the answer lies in the nature of the dominant social and intellectual discourse in Israel that has effectively silenced such voices by delegitimizing the very definition of the *mizrahi* woman as a speaking subject. The discussion I offer about the way *mizrahi* women were constructed as a social category and simultaneously silenced in Israeli scholarly discourse leads to several observations about the sociology and politics of knowledge in Israel. I ask: How are categories of knowledge defined in Israel and by whom? Who decides what is worthy of "serious" research and what is the "exotic" marginalized domain of knowledge reserved for women scholars and/or anthropologists? Finally, the most critical question I raise is: What do we learn from this case study that explores the links between scholarship and identity about multiple systems of domination and the way they define access to power and privilege, shape peoples' identities and experiences in Israel and elsewhere?

If I were to follow the accepted positivist style of mainstream Israeli scholarship, I would begin with a simple definition of our "subject matter." It would say something like: "*Mizrahim*, also known as *Sephardim* or *Oriental*s, are Jews who migrated to Israel from Asia and Africa, mostly from Muslim societies. Jews who migrated from Europe and America are known as *Ashkenazim*." I would then cite the thoroughly-documented fact that *Mizrahim* in Israel constitute the lower socio-economic ranks of the Jewish population in Israel, and then proceed to note that the position of *mizrahi* women is even lower than that of their men folk. *Mizrahi* women cluster at "the bottom of the female labor market, service and production jobs."² I might then add that *Mizrahim*, especially first generation of immigrants, are "traditional" and note the unenviable position of *mizrahi* women, in patriarchal families. Following such a model implies, of course, that we are dealing here with a well-defined population consisting of the interlocking categories of gender and place of origin.

¹ Routledge, 1990.

² Bernstein, Deborah 1993:195.

My starting point for this essay rejects such an essentialist model of identity. I opt for what Anderson and Hill-Collins (1995) call an “interactive model.” I wish to conceptualize *mizrahi* women as a social category that is shaped in a moving process that determines not only ethnic and gender identities, but also patterns of inequality and power. The position of *mizrahi* women within the interlocking categories of ethnicity, class and gender, I argue, is significant not because it statistically places people in categories, but because such positioning shapes the concept of self and structures interactions, daily experience and opportunities. Cornel West, the African American philosopher, wrote that race matters in the US. because it is a “constitutive element of life” in America. Ethnicity and gender, I wish to argue here, are similarly constitutive elements in Israeli life. They affect access to power and privilege; they construct meanings and shape people’s everyday experience.

Saying that *mizrahi* women emerge as a social category in a matrix of domination and meaning does not say, however, that it is a homogeneous group without tensions and internal contradictions. It is precisely these varied experiences of *mizrahi* women at factories and in peripheral towns, in the margins of academic life and in muted public discourses that must be explored. This essay is written to uncover the very process of silencing; its goal is to expose the exclusionary practices that inhibited the exploration of our own muted experiences. “Once it is understood that subjects are formed through exclusionary operations,” feminist theorist Joan Scott has written, “it becomes necessary to trace the operations of that construction and erasure.” I would like to focus this essay on one arena of the wider process of such construction and erasure of the *mizrahi* woman as a subject in Israel-academic discourse.

To understand the way Israeli academic discourse has conceptualized *mizrahi* women one must untangle two intertwined key concepts: *Mizrahiyut* (a collective identity claimed by people of *mizrahi* origin) and Israeli feminism. *Mizrahi* women’s thinking has to struggle against a double process of erasure and silencing. As the female members of a subordinated ethnoclass, *mizrahi* women intellectuals face hostile reactions to their very claim that *Mizrahiyut*, is a viable basis for their action and thought. The negation of *mizrahi* collective identity as a basis for distinctive claims, material and symbolic, is a powerful one precisely because *Mizrahim*, as Jews, are said to be part of the mainstream.

Unlike Palestinians, who are excluded from the definition of the Israeli Jewish national Self, *Mizrahim* are said to be “Israelis,” although “Israelis with a problem.” Their positioning at the margins of Israeli political, economic and cultural life (a position reproduced for the fourth generation since immigration) is constructed as “temporary;” as a problem to be surmounted with good liberal policies of “lifting up.” While the prevailing Israeli academic research has been obsessed with recording the parameters of what it calls “the ethnic problem,” it has not allowed any *mizrahi* assertive voice to share its discursive space. Israeli feminist discourse, in its turn, has not been able to free itself from the dominant male-centered orientalist images of *mizrahi* women.

Let us begin with the larger picture and examine how women, in particular, or gender relations, in general, have been treated in mainstream academic discourse. I asked a student to examine the long list of scholarly books that claimed to describe and analyze “Israeli Society.” She found that among the dozens on Israeli society written in the past four decades, only one included gender relations in its overview.³ All the others,

³ edited by Uri Ram published in 1993

including those which deal with divisions and social gaps in Israeli society (e.g., Smootha et al. 1978, Ben Porat 1989) include no discussion on women in Israel. In one classical book entitled *Israeli Social Structure* edited by Eisenstadt, Adler, Bar Yoseph (a woman), and Cahana in 1969, the student found one mention of women. In a short paragraph that deals with “the Arab village” there is a sentence that reads “The women in the [Arab] village constitute a problem of their own [*be’ayah be’fneh atzmah*]”. In Eisenstadt’s updated volume *The Transformation of Israeli Society*, 1985, one finds tables that present data on patterns of employment and salary along gender lines, but no discussion of the data is offered.

Significant academic work about inequality along gender lines begin to appear in Israel only in the mid-1970s. The first tentative essays (several later anthologized into readers about “Women in Israel”) were concerned with establishing the legitimacy of this subject matter. They tried to dispel the powerful myth that Israeli men and women have been equal partners in the founding of a Zionist-socialist society. Even in the late 1980s, Sylvia Fogel-Bijawi and Alice Shalvi asked, “Is there a problem of inequality between the genders in Israel?”⁴ (1988). By the early 1990s, three collections on women in Israel signaled the beginning of an assertive feminist scholarship in Israeli academe. However, the struggle against inequality along gender lines took a universal “Israeli woman” as its subject matter. Differences within this postulated “Israeli woman” category along class, nationality and ethnic origin were seldom discussed. Regardless of their varied theoretical and ideological background, the editors of the three influential volumes had little to say about the unique experience, actions and struggles of *mizrahi* women in Israel. Reviewing *Israeli Feminism New and Old*, Barbara Swirski writes “All the events described below occurred among Jews and were not relevant for Arab women, nor did they have anything to do with Oriental or Orthodox Jewish women.” In fact, this new feminist writing, had replaced the limited, unabashedly paternalistic work carried out on *mizrahi* women during the ’50s and ’60s with silence.

Why has current feminist scholarship been so limited in its effort to go beyond its preoccupation with urban, professional middle-class *ashkenazi* women? Why did it replace the blatant Orientalist bias that triggered earlier interest in *mizrahi* women with a vacuum? Before addressing these questions, let us return to the 1950s and to the insertion of *mizrahi* women into the larger orientalist discourse in Israel.

Sociological research on *mizrahi* women during the ’50s and ’60s was part of a larger academic discourse that expressed open paternalism towards the Jews of the East. This discourse was inseparable from the aggressively orientalist public discourse that posited *ashkenazi* Jews, who controlled the institutions of power of the young state as “western” vis-a-vis the Jews of the East who needed to be transformed into “new Israelis.” The term that Rivka Bar Yossef, a key woman sociologist, coined for this process is: desocialization and resocialization.

If *Mizrahim* were backward, then their women were doubly so. Studies of the time (Palgi, Fietelson, Ortar) objectified their negative traits as “traditional.” Unlike the professional, progressive (*ashkenazi* middle-class) woman, the *mizrahi* woman was limited in her role as mother and wife. The bitter irony is that, even there, the *mizrahi* woman was found inadequate – not only as an individual, but, more critically, for the state because she lacked the ability to prepare the next generation for Israeli life. In a study entitled “Pregnancy-

⁴ Both articles 1988

East and West” published in 1966, Dr. Ester Goshen-Gottstein, a clinical psychologist at the Hadassah Medical School compared attitudes to first pregnancy between oriental and western women living in Israel. Both oriental and western women might be “motherly,” she wrote, but “the woman living in a modern marriage will tend to give child-centered reasons for wanting her first child” whereas for the oriental woman the child “often represents an avenue for the husband’s lack of attention.” The research also “found” that pregnant oriental women were “selfish,” “self-centered” and “narcissistic.”

The fixation on the “traditionalism” of *mizrahi* women led to quite powerful observations. Thus Palgi, in an often-quoted article (1955), identify “typical personality disturbances” of immigrant Iraqi women in Israel of the 1950s. These “traditional” women exhibit dramatic “psychological scars” caused by adjustment to “modern” life. There is no mention in this study of their difficult and alienating experience in transition camps (*ma’abarot*) where they struggled to keep their families together in humiliating conditions for years before they could move into permanent homes. “Modern life” on the margins of Israeli society in the 1950s may, indeed, have caused psychological scars – not because of their assumed “traditional mind,” but due to the dehumanization they experienced in the hands of those who sought to “save” them and their children.

Indeed, these “scientific” studies are marked by a missionary-like zeal that called for state intervention to prevent the “cultural retardation” of *mizrahi* children by their mothers. Ethnographic studies published in the late 1950s documented the “primitive” child-rearing practices of mothers of the Kurdish community. Psychologist Gina Ortar made a career advising the educational system how to “rescue” *mizrahi* children from the “cultural backwardness” of their families. These kids, a whole theory explained, were *te’unei tipuah* – “in need of treatment.”

The concept “in need of treatment” was used extensively in Israel in the late 1950s and 1960s to legitimize paternalistic educational policies that identified *mizrahi* children as lacking in skills and abilities in comparison with their *ashkenazi* counterparts. Even dramatic changes in Israel had little effect on the paternalistic, corrective urge of this “in need of treatment” logic. It withstood the downfall of Labor hegemony due to the massive *mizrahi* defection, the national trauma after the 1973 war, as well as major shifts in theoretical frameworks for education. When a Central Statistics Office publication described almost a quarter (24.9 percent) of all women in Israel as “mothers with many children” (*imahot m’rubot yeladim*) with a formal education of zero to four years, the same paternalism pertained. A new crop of research projects, several commissioned and financed by the Israeli Center for Demography, reproduced the earlier negative depiction of the population of *mizrahi* women as *nashim te’unot tipuach* – “women in need of treatment.” These women were described as “passive and dependent,” with low self-image and self-esteem, whose “spiritual powers were “limited” and whose “survival patterns are not among the more advanced”⁶ Shoshana Sharni (whose work was published by the Office of the Prime Minister) warned in 1973 of the *mizrahi* woman’s “limited knowledge, hints of limited and shallow personality... If we see this mother as one of the key figures children identify with – the prospects are not encouraging.” Based on this research, social workers and psychologists devised a range of intervention programs that were intended to uplift and improve the lot of these less-fortunate Jewish sisters.

⁶ Sharni and others 1976.

Orly Benjamin, who reviews this body of work and cites many more examples of its biases, asks: why dwell on such outdated examples of what is evidently bad research carried out almost two decades ago?⁷ Her answer is that with no alternative sources, this outdated work remains the main source for more recent scholarship on *mizrahi* women.

Of this more recent scholarship, I have located five studies with *mizrahi* women as their subject. Two (Yael Katzir 1976 and Lisa Gilad 1989) are about Yemeni Jewish women; one (Rachel Wasserfall 1990) is about Moroccan women; one is about Tunisian women (Esther Schely-Newman, 1991); and the last (Susan Starr Sered 1987, 1992) is about pious *mizrahi* women in Jerusalem. All five authors are women anthropologists. The limited number of their studies is underscored when we consider that of the five, only two (Susan Sered and Esther Schely-Newman) currently hold academic positions. Yael Katzir and Rachel Wasserfall dropped out of academic life and have published little of their dissertation material. Lisa Gilad was killed in a tragic car accident. Their few publications have had almost no impact on shaping mainstream Israeli academic male-centered discourse.

In that mainstream writing of the last two decades, *mizrahi* women are never subjects in their own right. Rather, research treats them as objects, a category that illuminates by contrast characteristics of *ashkenazi* women. Take, for example, a study concerned with patterns of marriage and parenthood among “young women in Israel.” The researcher, Haya Stier, asserts that, “In Israel it is expected from women of *mizrahi* origin to enter family duties earlier than women of *ashkenazi* origin because women of *mizrahi* origin represent a more traditionalist group.”⁸ The far from startling results of her research confirms this “widely-known” social fact. The tautological nature of the research design and argument is lost on the researcher.

A second, more subtle but not significantly different, example is Tamar Rapoport’s article that seeks to explore the experiences of sexuality in two populations of Israeli girls who attend boarding schools.⁹ Although it is clear for any reader familiar with Israel that one group is *mizrahi* and the other *ashkenazi*, the author chooses the familiar euphemisms of girls “in dire straits” (*bemetzuka*) and girls from “established” (*mevusasot*) families. The short quotes of the *mizrahi* girls are peppered with references to their families as “primitive.” There is a thinly hidden moralism about the “good ways” of the girls from “established homes” and about the hopeless victimized position of the girls “in dire-straits.” This article, like the more common statistically-based kind, never rises beyond the all too-familiar clichés of *Mizrahiyut* as a debilitating “traditionalist” cultural package that colors all of life for these young women.

Maybe because it claims to represent their voices, this article suggests the limits and dangers of contemporary liberal sociological analysis in Israel. Such scholarship provides evidence of inequalities along gender and ethnic lines but never explores how patterns of inequality in the larger political economy and history of Israel have shaped such experiences and structured their reproduction. Such scholarship contributes to the hegemonic discourse precisely because it explains nothing. By representing, through respected, academic jargon, the multiple marginality of *mizrahi* women as a fact, these studies invite an acceptance of the status-quo.

⁷ Benjamin 1997

⁸ 1995:390, translated from Hebrew, italics mine

⁹ 1993

In this view, *mizrahi* women, even second and third generation, are disadvantaged because of some frozen, unshakable “traditionalism.” Little sustained effort has been made to systematically challenge the epistemological and theoretical presuppositions of such a hegemonic model. Moreover, despite the obsessive statistical recording of what is known in this literature as “the ethnic gap” – the patterns of inequality along gender, class and ethnic affiliation – Israeli mainstream academic research has largely failed to develop a theoretical framework that linked these cross-cutting lines of division. No serious effort was made to more fully describe, much less explain, the reality emerging from multiple oppressions. The effort to reconceptualize critical dimensions of this dominant model and to expose its seemingly “scientific” representation of reality as being ideologically and culturally constructed has only begun. “Reclaiming,” writes Hill-Collins is “discovering, reinterpreting, analyzing in new ways despite the silencing mechanism of mainstream discourse.”¹⁰

The intellectual *mizrahi* discourse I now turn to works against what Spivak has called “social and disciplinary epistemic violence,” which is extremely effective in today’s Israeli academic discourse. Epistemic violence is the open aggression directed by those who define their systemic knowledge as the only “true” kind of knowledge against any other claims. The small community engaged in *mizrahi* intellectual feminist discourse has struggled against a very powerful hegemonic discourse. Their (our) initial subversive act has been to define ourselves as feminists and *mizrahi*. The question of who defines whom, and the power relations involved in this process is of crucial significance. It may be helpful to examine what I call the “political economy” of the small, emerging group of women who make up the core of this contemporary *mizrahi* feminist discourse.

First, *mizrahi* women intellectuals in contemporary Israel do not hold central positions in mainstream Israeli sociology, anthropology, or political science departments. The few who were able to establish academic careers, like Ella Shohat or Smadar Lavie, did it in the U.S. Film maker and activist Simone Bitton lives in Paris. Those of us who hold academic positions within Israel are marginalized. Vicki Shiran teaches on a part time basis at several academic institutions. Dahan Kalev and I have non-tenured positions at institutions and departments that are peripheral to the mainstream. Doli Ben Habib is completing her doctorate. Outside the academy, Tikva Levi and Mira Eliezer run an NGO, *Hila*, that works to empower parents in peripheral towns and neighborhoods. Tikva Honig-Parnass is an editor of *News from Within*, an independent left-leaning magazine, and Barbara Swirski established and now manages *Adva*.

This small group of women has very few avenues of publication and thus limited exposure to wider audiences. Most of their work appears in the form of short essays and interviews published in radical, small journals (e.g., the Israeli feminist journal *Noga*; the radical *mizrahi*-centered publication *Iton Acher* and in two left-leaning publications of the Alternative Information Center, *News from Within* (English) and *MeTzad Sheni* (Hebrew).

Central to the evolving *mizrahi* feminist discourse is the blurring of the lines that distinguish academic from activist spheres. The same women who organize and shape conferences and workshops are those who link theory to practice. One of the earliest and most articulate voices to examine feminist theory in

¹⁰ 1993:13

its Israeli context is that of Vicki Shiran. A legal scholar with many years of activism in *mizrahi* and feminist circles, Shiran is key in reshaping Israeli feminism and *mizrahi* consciousness. In 1991, Shiran developed a comprehensive thesis about what it means to be a feminist in Israel in the 1990s.¹¹ She addressed two audiences: the general public and, more narrowly, feminists active in Israeli feminist organizations.

Shiran described the state of Israeli feminism as a sad situation where very few women define themselves as feminists, and where substantive ideas about woman's liberation have neither taken root nor created a fertile ground for thinking or taking action. Feminism is widely ridiculed in Israeli public discourse and its political and social importance diminished. Shiran, like all other *mizrahi* feminists, espouses a radical rather than reformist feminism. The latter, she observes, focuses its struggle on getting more of the cake (e.g., more women in the Knesset) and therefore "plays into the hands of the oppressor and contributes to the reproduction of the status quo." She refuses to play the role of "token *mizrahi* woman" in the mostly middle-class, *ashkenazi* feminist circles in Israel.

Shiran is not alone in observing that the core of the Israeli feminist movement is made up of middle-class, *ashkenazi* Jewish women. Katya Azoulay writes that Israeli women organizations are managed by an "exclusive forum of women who believe that their academic and professional degrees grant them insights which are better than the insights gained by women whose life and work experience had prepared them, perhaps to no lesser degree, to represent and highlight issues relevant to a wider section of the population."¹² Barbara Swirski argues that "one of the causes for the failure of the feminist movement in Israel to reach the wider public of women stems from its neglect of inequality in other spheres of Israeli society... the kind that exists between *Ashkenazim* and *Mizrahim*, between Jews and Palestinians." Swirski notes that "Palestinian and *Mizrahi* women who were active within their own communities had a hard time seeing these feminists as partners in their struggles; they felt the [organized] feminists do not acknowledge the worth of their struggles."

Dahan Kalev points to the double standard of middle-class *ashkenazi* feminists who focus on politically-correct issues such as demonstration for peace, or for advancing the cause of lesbians or Palestinian women, but never on the needs of low-income *mizrahi* women (who, she notes, might be baby-sitting for the demonstrating women).¹³

Shiran extends this criticism by insisting that the question of *mizrahi* and Palestinian women and their oppression must alter the very nature of feminist analysis in Israel. Shohat, Shiran, and Dahan-Kalev insist that any concrete understanding of the position of women in Israel must take into account the intersection of ethnic, religious and class background. The oppression of women in Israel occurs within their respective class, religious and national circles. "A Jewish *mizrahi* woman," Shiran writes, "who is oppressed by *mizrahi* and *ashkenazi* men is not in the same boat with *ashkenazi* women because she is discriminated against in comparison to these women and is often oppressed by them." When the cross-cutting lines of gender, ethnicity and class are analyzed, the simple call for "Israeli sisterhood" comes into question. Shohat is explicit: "Any attempt to tell us there is one homogenic feminism, is an effort to silence us."

¹¹ in a three part essay published in Iton Acher entitled "Feminist Rebel"

¹² 1991

¹³ 1997

Shiran describes the implications of such an analysis with regard to an affirmative action proposal presented to the Knesset. As a member of the Committee for Advancement of Women in Government Services, Shiran found herself in a contradictory position. The proposal called for the advancement of women over men with equal qualifications in top government positions. In the Israeli reality of intersecting ethnic and gender hierarchies however, the first ranks are occupied by Jewish *ashkenazi* men, and the second ranks by *mizrahi* men and *ashkenazi* women. These *mizrahi* men, Shiran noted, support the households of many *mizrahi* women. If she supported her “*ashkenazi* sisters’” struggle for advancement, was she not undermining her own, and other *mizrahi* women’s economic interests? In advocating such ethnic-blind feminist advantage, was she not contributing for the increasing gap between *Mizrahim* and *Ashkenazim*?

Shiran points out that the very definition of the struggle (for advancement in the five highest-ranked government positions) is a reflection of the limited, intra-class and intra-ethnic group nature of the contemporary Israeli feminist political agenda. A committed agenda for equality would have redefined the struggle and extended it for all governmental posts, or placed its priority on middle-range posts where most women, *mizrahi* as well as *ashkenazi*, find themselves. Another direction could have been to redefine the criteria for job advancement in ways that will be more inclusive of *Mizrahim*. Given the gap in formal education between *Mizrahim* and *Ashkenazim*, a call for more flexible criteria for advancement to top managerial positions (for example, based on track records that demonstrate leadership and creativity, rather than an adherence to certificates and formal education) might advance less academically qualified *mizrahi* men and women.

In 1991, Shiran led a group of *mizrahi* feminists who demanded that the feminist movement adopt affirmative action principles in its own ranks and institute a policy of equal representation to *mizrahi* and Palestinian women. A year later, the system of equal self-representation was extended to lesbians. The entry of significant numbers of non-*ashkenazi* women into organized feminist circles ushered in a new era in the hitherto elitist feminist discourse. *Mizrahi* women took an active part in the planning of the ninth Israeli feminist conference and, for the first time, convened *mizrahi*-centered workshops. *Mizrahi* feminists invited *ashkenazi* women to discuss their own position and to explore their (perhaps racist or unexamined) views of *Mizrahim*.

The heated discussion about the nature of Israeli feminism reached a new, explosive level at the tenth conference when 200 *mizrahi* lower class women flooded the conference, invited in by the grassroots organization Hila. Israeli feminists were confronted with the question of class and ethnic divisions right in their own “front yard” – during their own yearly convention. Metzad Sheni later published the reflections of several women – *mizrahi* and *ashkenazi* – who had participated. Some claimed that they were humiliated by the *ashkenazi* organizers and that they faced blatant paternalism, such as instructions on what they should and should not discuss in the conference. Tikva Levi, manager of Hila said, “I personally heard paternalistic statements such as: “Don’t speak about your oppression at the hands of the *ashkenazi* establishment. Focus on your oppression by the hands of *mizrahi* men.” Vered Krako described the naked hostility between the two groups of women in the following way: “In the conference these (lower-class *mizrahi*) women met the very women who in their daily lives humiliate and oppress them – the teachers of their children, social workers, psychologists, counselors. These were the women who send their children to special education and vocational schools out of a distorted, racist perception of the *mizrahi* population.

It is obvious to everyone that (once channeled into such vocational schools) these kids could never attain a higher education or key positions in Israeli society. It is clear that the final product of such early educational channeling is a barely literate child, a drug addict, a prostitute or a juvenile delinquent.”

This volatile encounter between middle-class feminists and lower-class *mizrahi* women questioned the very claim for a shared feminist agenda. As one *mizrahi* activist put it, as long as *ashkenazi* feminism continues to focus on protesting cliterodectomy in Africa, it will remain irrelevant to *mizrahi* women and their more pressing agenda. A forum of about ten women, led by Hila activists, decided to organize a separate *mizrahi* feminist conference in 1996.¹⁴

It convened on the second weekend of May at the Green Beach Hotel in Natanya. I attended only a few months after my return to Israel after 17 years of academic exile in the U.S. and was carried away by the euphoria. The conference adopted the motto: “*We Are Here And This Is Ours.*” Tikva Levi described how she had been ashamed to bring her Iraqi-born mother to previous feminist conferences. “She is a real Arab,” she explained, alluding to the unbecoming, “shameful” connotation such Arab appearance (her mother is a Jew) entails in the dominant Israeli scene. Now, she beamed, she was certain that her mother would not only come but actively participate in workshops.

Henriette Dahan-Kalev put forward the same idea in her opening remarks: “This conference will enable *mizrahi* women to come here without leaving part of their identity at home. There are no stereotypes here and you don’t need to explain anything or apologize to anyone. For me, this is a dream come true.” Indeed, the conference was a statement of *mizrahi* assertive feminist voices. About 400 women attended, including Ethiopian, Arab and *ashkenazi* women who chose to support the *mizrahi* agenda. There were workshops on “educating our children,” “the role of *mizrahi* women in initiating social change,” *mizrahi* medicine, *mizrahi* music, and “the unerasable past.” There was a session conducted in Amharic, a workshop on “how to look teachers/clerks/bosses in the eyes” and more. The conference was hailed as a turning point. Elated participants and observers declared that the conference widened the agenda of struggle for equality and redefined the very nature of Israeli feminism. But it also demanded rethinking of several key questions that remained painfully unresolved.

We undertook a deeply conflictual evaluation of the goals and limitations of the *mizrahi* feminist agenda, identifying the contradictions inherent in identity-based politics. We asked: What is *mizrahi* feminism? Who has the right to represent it? What is its main agenda and how does it deal with internal divisions along class lines? How does it define itself vis-à-vis *Ashkenazim* on the one hand, and Palestinians on the other.

Like many other controversial issues, the question of who can articulate and represent the *mizrahi* voice was raised by Vicki Shiran. Shiran raised the question of representation in her biting comments on an essay published in *Metzad Shenit*. The author of the essay, Noga Dagan, is an *ashkenazi* activist who was among the organizers of the *mizrahi* conference. Dagan’s essay attempted to place emerging *mizrahi* feminist thought within a framework of global feminist trends and theories.

¹⁴ Tikva Levi noted: “After the 10th feminist conference, a forum of *mizrahi* women who were interested in exploring their own particular issues among themselves was formed. We are interested in a feminist conference with a *mizrahi* agenda, one that will explore our history, our daily struggles.” (1995)

Shiran objected to Dagan's claim to be a "theoretician" of *mizrahi* feminism: "Who does she represent in her seemingly historical review? What is her identity and politics in the context of her wonderful "politics of identity" thesis? What interest does she serve when she determines that "the concept of *mizrahi* women is political and not ascriptive? Does she speak on my behalf or on her own?"

Shiran has no doubt that by positing a political, rather than ascriptive definition of the category of *mizrahi* feminism, Dagan aims to dismantle the *mizrahi* collective, appropriate its message, and (without identifying herself vis a vis the group) speak in its name. The "Dagan incident" enables us to explore the more general, complex relationships between *mizrahi* and *ashkenazi* feminists on the one hand, and between *mizrahi* intellectuals and the majority of lower-class *mizrahi* women on the other. It also leads to a questioning of the boundaries of the collectivity defined at the crossing lines of gender and ethnicity.

Dagan is not the only non-*mizrahi* woman to take part in the discourse and political action related to *mizrahi* feminism. Tikva Honig-Parnas, the editor of *News from Within* explained her commitment in the following way: "My *mizrahi* feminist stand is a political and ideological choice; it is not linked to my ethnic origin. I do not accept the basic claims of the oppressing class I was raised in. My wishes for social change and equality are linked also to the liberation of *Mizrahim* from their oppression."

Honig-Parnas explains the political and ideological choices she made as a two-step process: "First I discovered how classic Marxism ignored the subject of women's oppression, as the concept of "working class" refers actually only to the male worker. That's how I came to feminism. The second discovery was how the term 'working class' in the eyes of the traditional left in the world and in Israel misses the racial dimension. Here in Israel, we saw an abstract (*ashkenazi*) worker and resolved that as long as the national, Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not resolved, there was no chance of joining the class struggle. All this, while most of the working class is *mizrahi*, and while one can not distinguish between his class and his cultural-identity oppression. That's how I became a *mizrahi* feminist."

Another *ashkenazi* conference organizer stated: "I feel tremendously privileged to be part of this gathering, particularly as an *ashkenazi* woman." She explained that her work for the *mizrahi* feminist cause enabled her to act against what she calls "Israeli racism that was inculcated into me." Prior to the first *mizrahi* conference, Tikva Levi argued: "Ashkenazi feminists in the general conference wanted to channel the discussion towards issues of ethnic origin. We had objected to that. In fact, half of the organizers of the *Mizrahi* conference are *Ashkenazi*. *Mizrahi* identity is not defined by one's ethnic origin. If there are women, or men, who in their analysis and their social consciousness are part of our struggle, we will not say no to them. Why should we? On the basis of ethnic origin? This is racism."

These women make it amply clear that the direction taken by *mizrahi* feminists in Israel is not towards a rigid, ethnocentric definition of membership. The issue, if we go back to the Dagan Incident, is not one about identity; it is about the right to represent. Shiran is very clear that her criticism of Dagan's essay does not imply that *ashkenazi* women cannot and should not concern themselves with *mizrahi* feminist issues. She calls on Dagan to identify herself as a member of the hegemonic group and in relation to *mizrahi*. Shiran's point resonates with Patricia Hill Collins' ideas. Hill Collins poses the question "Who can be a black feminist?"¹⁵ She rejects the essentialist, ascriptive idea (all African American women are such by virtue of

¹⁵ 1993:33.

biology), but she equally rejects the purely idealist analysis that presents membership as a conscious political choice by any person, regardless of her background, world view and experience. In resolving the tension between these two extreme positions, Hill Collins directs her attention to the centrality of black women intellectuals in producing black feminist thought.

The argument is that the concrete experiences of *mizrahi* and American black women intellectuals as members of specific ethnic, racial, class and gender groups necessarily play a significant role in our understanding of the world. Despite the divisions and variations among us, says Shiran, we share collective memory and a similar historical experience. What is needed at this point is a safe space where we can discuss such history and painful memory, and pose the difficult questions that link our position as oppressed and oppressors.

The call for creating a collective space where *mizrahi* issues can be discussed without the need to explain or apologize was made by several *mizrahi* feminists. Levi articulated the need to find a place where “we can clarify for ourselves what is *mizrahi* feminism.” The workshops planned for the first conference, says Levi, were intended to create a process of consciousness-raising. Similarly, in Shohat’s multi-cultural feminist framework, although people with the right “political identity” can join the group, discussions and clarifications of “our dilemmas” must be carried out in a framework where, in Shohat words; “we would not have to fend off negative images and hostile attacks.” Like Shiran, Shohat sees the need for internal debate as a necessary stage before a more secure *mizrahi* feminist agenda is developed.

The call, therefore, is for developing autonomy of *mizrahi* intellectual thought and not for separation. Autonomy stems from a recognition of internal strength, unlike separation that is motivated by fear. Unfortunately, the hopes that the first *mizrahi* feminist conference would enable internal interrogation and a feeling of empowerment were largely disappointed. Biton, Shiran, Shohat and others lamented that the conference had missed the opportunity of developing an autonomous *mizrahi* voice precisely because of the presence of *ashkenazi* and Palestinian women. “We should not hide behind the broad back of what we call *ashkenazi* women’s racism” Shiran writes in her review of the *mizrahi* conference. “We should begin with an internal discourse that explores racism, paternalism, and dishonesty, this time among ourselves, against our sisters and others.”

The presence of the *ashkenazi* and Palestinian women at the conference, Shiran argues, prevented the emergence of such internal, difficult interrogation because we engaged in battling with these women instead of with our own issues. *Mizrahi* women used *ashkenazi* women in the same way they were used by them in the *Ashkenazi*-centered yearly feminist conferences. “We wanted to ‘show them’ who is in charge here,” claims Shiran. “It was a show of force, not an exchange.” Shohat concurs: “Only an in depth analysis of the non-homogenous nature of the feminist project,” she explains, “can bring about a vital cooperation between diverse women.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Where does this leave well-intentioned *ashkenazi* feminists, especially those who actively worked for the *mizrahi* feminist cause? They can certainly join the struggle but from their explicit position as members of their own social and ethnic group. Shohat, like Shiran, adopts a composite model that views ascriptive identity as the basis for a distinctive, political identity. Inspired by the multi-cultural discourse, Shohat speaks about the need for internal work of consolidating a group solidarity. Only once such work is complete, coalitions, based on proper analysis of the connections among gender, class, nationality, race and religion can emerge. Unlike Shohat and Shiran’s views Tikva Parnas-Honig (1996:34) warns that “the politics of identity” and “multiculturalism” might lead to closure, particularism, and reformist politics that might destroy the radical beginnings of the *Mizrahi* organized existence.”

Conference organizers had invited Palestinian women as welcomed guests to rejoice in our shared cultural roots but had not provided any serious platform or decision making role for the Palestinian participants. The issue of *Mizrahim*-Palestinian relations surfaced when popular singer, Margalit Tzanaani introduced one of her songs with a comment about “Jerusalem – the eternal capital city of the Jews.” Her comment underscored the delicate position of the Palestinian women at the conference and the ambivalence and diverging political views among the *mizrahi* women. In planning the conference, explained one of the organizers, a conscious choice was made not to discuss the issue of Palestinian nationalism. “We thought it was too early to deal with the issue at this first conference,” said Levi. “One needs to explore these issues in great depth and not with slogans.”

For anyone familiar with the Israeli scene, Levi’s comment and her hesitation to introduce the Palestinian question into the agenda planned for the first *Mizrahi*-focused gathering are pregnant with contradictory meanings. Was Levi projecting the hegemonic stereotypic views of lower-class *Mizrahim* as “Arab haters” in her choosing to postpone the discussion of the place of Palestinian women in Israeli feminist agenda? Was she trying to skirt the most explosive question about the shared Arabism of Jewish and non-Jewish women?

Although she was criticized on both accounts, I do not share that reading. Says Mira Eliezer, “Let us not forget who lives with the Arabs. Who are we talking about when we say ‘co-existence?’ The *Ashkenazim*? *Shalom Akhshav* (Peace Now) people do not live with Arabs. Those who live in the mixed towns are predominately *Mizrahim*. They tell us *Mizrahim* are right-wing while the settlements are peopled mainly by *Ashkenazim* from the US.”¹⁷ Tikva Levi adds: “We must mention the hypocrisy of *Meretz* (a left of center party supported mostly by urban and kibbutz middle class *Ashkenazim*) who argue that *Mizrahim* hate Arabs. It was *Meretz* who created our cultural denial. We must arrive at an understanding that the enemy is not the Arabs, but those who made us deny our Arabism.”

Be that as it may, the choice not to directly examine *Mizrahi*-Palestinian relations at the conference backfired. Amal Alsaneh, a Palestinian student of Social Work at Ben-Gurion University wrote, “I felt like a guest, and not like a full participant. The cultural similarities that linked me to the *Mizrahi* women who invited me did not diminish my sense of alienation. I felt more blocked there than in the general feminist conference of the previous year. I felt oppressed. Yes, it is true that *ashkenazi* women participate in the oppression of *mizrahi* women, but the *mizrahi* women, in their turn, oppress Arab women.”

Several *mizrahi* activists later concurred that their group had exhibited the same racist attitudes and exclusionary practices towards the Palestinian women they had experienced at the hand of *ashkenazi* women. Biton expresses this position powerfully: “We know what oppression is better than any group in Israeli society because we are simultaneously oppressors and oppressed,” she writes. “We are oppressed as women and as *Frankiyot*, as ‘women in need of care,’ as ‘house maids’ as ‘prostitutes’ and more. We are oppressors because we are part of the ruling group as Jewish women and Zionists. If indeed we have managed to rescue a few *mizrahi* kids from disadvantaged educational paths, we have also succeeded in securing for those children a future as oppressors and military occupiers.”¹⁸

¹⁷ in the panel convened prior to the *Mizrahi* conference *Mitzad Shenit*, April 1996.

¹⁸ in her essay “oppressors and oppressed” published in 1996.

With regard to the conference she says: “We might have silenced a few paternalistic *ashkenazi* women but had not managed to create a situation where an Arab women could openly speak.” Biton, like Shiran, sees the need to examine the *mizrahi* position as oppressors of Palestinian women not as a weakness but as a necessary step for a stronger, more coherent agenda. The emerging *mizrahi* feminist discourse will become the most radical and progressive voice in Israeli leftist discourse, projects Biton, only when it fights oppression in all its manifestations – the kind that victimize us and the kind that grant us a privileged position.

Until now, I have not discussed intra-*Mizrahi* class divisions. Shiran raises the issue in her direct, uncompromising way: “It is easy for us to talk about the ‘*ashkenazi* boss who exploits her *mizrahi* maid’ but is the *mizrahi* boss less exploitative?” The tensions that emerged in the 10th conference were related not only to the large presence of the *mizrahi* women organized by Hila, but also to their class background. These women who came with many children, feminist organizers argued, saw an opportunity to have a weekend at the beach at a bargain price.

The conference organizers are alleged to have paternalistically proposed to arrange another weekend for these women, with a few workshops thrown in to educate them about feminism. Yet, as Shiran notes with great pain, the woman who made that comment was herself a *mizrahi* feminist with a middle-class background who has been a veteran activist in the mostly *ashkenazi* organized feminist movement. Henriette Dahan-Kalev touched on the issue of intra-*mizrahi* class divisions when she wrote that despite her initial excitement she found the *mizrahi* conference “populist.” There was a fear among the organizers, contends Dahan Kalev, that abstract discussions about the nature of *mizrahi* feminist thought might be “above the head” of poor *mizrahi* women. Such internal “paternalism,” she says, led to “populism” and inhibited a serious discussion about the meaning of *mizrahi* feminism.

For Shohat, intra-*mizrahi* class divisions are not an issue. The distinction she makes is between intellectuals and the wider oppressed community. Shohat places at the center a group of committed intellectuals – “those of us who have devoted much time, thought and work to these subjects.” The role of this group is to carry out a thorough analysis of the varied life experiences of women and the links between their various forms of oppressions. Shohat posits a direct and necessary link between a sound analysis of the multiple oppression of a particular group and the strategies for liberation to be adopted by members of that group. Only after performing such analysis can the intellectual offer “the most suitable liberatory strategies” for women (and men) in “our communities.” Another courageous discussion of the questions of representation and intra-*mizrahi* class relations is offered by Dahan Kalev. In an important essay that was read with great interest by Israeli *ashkenazi* feminist academics, Dahan Kalev contends that the *mizrahi* feminist agenda is located at the crossing axis of ethnic and gender-based oppressions. The aim of *mizrahi* feminist struggles is therefore to empower *mizrahi* women.

Empowering strategies vary. One, adopted by *Hila* activists Levi, Eliezer, Krako and others has been to work directly with *mizrahi* lower-class women at the grass roots, identify their special needs and interests, help develop their own leadership potential, and through such sustained grassroots work enable a process of raising their social and political consciousness. These *mizrahi* activists have given up hope on mainstream Israeli feminism as a significant arena for social action. The second strategy, chosen by Dahan Kalev, continues to work within the existing *ashkenazi*-dominated institutional feminist framework. Its main goal

is to secure for *mizrahi* women their share in the state-generated financial, legal, and political resources allotted to all women and, within this context, raise the *mizrahi* perspective in every event, working against the invisibility of *mizrahi* needs and interests.

The emerging *mizrahi* feminist discourse is a vibrant and courageous discourse. It has faced critical, unresolved issues that underlie the social experience of women in Israel in ways that “mainstream” Israeli feminist discourse has never dared to do. It has brought to the surface the question of the relations between Palestinian and Jewish women in Israel and explored the deep tensions between middle-class, intellectual women on the one hand and working-class, underprivileged women on the other. It has opened a public discussion that examines the everyday and political implications of working within non-essentialist ethnic definitions of community. Despite its limited range, both in terms of its time, depth, number of intellectual/activists engaged, and the meager institutional resources available for its production and distribution, the impact of *mizrahi* feminist intellectual thought on mainstream Israeli feminism has been tremendous.

The annual Israeli mainstream feminist conference has adopted a strict policy known as the “quarter system” to give Palestinian, Lesbian, *mizrahi* and *ashkenazi* women equal representation on panels and in workshops. It is widely acknowledged that feminist concerns go beyond the narrow focus on middle-class women issues. Yet little of this dynamism and critical reevaluation has entered Israeli academe to reshape mainstream scholarship. In February of 1997, I outlined some of guidelines that I found essential for the reshaping of future research on and with *mizrahi* women in Israel.¹⁹

The kind of research I hope to encourage is NOT more that “fills in” the glaring gap in our ethnographic knowledge but a radically different kind of research and analysis. I do not want to see more research that documents the “customs” of Moroccan or Yemeni women, but research that examines Israeli social processes and institutions – labor, family, class, politics – from the perspective of the double marginality of *mizrahi* women. I propose to study *mizrahi* women from a theoretical perspective, inspired by post-colonial writers and especially by Homi Bhabha, who calls for the rejection of the seemingly natural binarism between center and periphery and opts, instead, for a research strategy that positions itself on the boundaries. Such a research strategy involves an analysis of the historical dynamics that created, fixed and reproduced social categories in Israel from the perspective and daily experience of *mizrahi* women. From this perspective, the universal Israeli who stands at the center of mainstream Israeli academe is revealed as an *ashkenazi* male. Once we deconstruct the dominant images that have created the binaries of male/female, east/west, private/public spheres we begin to see beyond the objectification of *mizrahi* women in Israel. We challenge the conceptual hegemonic structure and the social practices such system enables.

Second, there must be a focus on the narratives of all *mizrahi* women – the stories of factory workers in peripheral towns as well as the story of gaining political consciousness as both *mizrahi* women and feminists. Understanding the reality of life of all these women must come from their own place and in their own words, not through external concepts and terms. Hill Collins, speaking about African-American women, explains the necessity for such research strategy for subjugated women. “Being subjugated to the reality of multiple

¹⁹ at the 28th meeting of the Israeli Sociological Association

oppressions and distrusting the dominant paradigms of knowledge,” these women “rely on their own experience to survive and to determine what is real and true.” Particular attention must be paid to research methodologies that enable the women to break their silence, to enable them to speak for themselves.

Third, a research strategy that comes out of the double marginality of *mizrahi* femininity opens more questions about Israeli feminism today because it links the analysis of the intersections of class, gender, power, labor experience and family. Clearly, an analysis that takes only one such line of division – for example gender, and discusses it in distinction from class – leads to a distorted understanding not only a partial one.

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