
The Politics of Academic Teaching in Israel: How the War Affects Our Teaching of Ethnicity, Gender, and Social History

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War in the Middle East has focused attention on the protracted national conflict between Jews and Arabs or, in strict political terms, on the competing struggles for statehood by the Israeli Zionists and their Palestinian neighbors. In the context of such ongoing regional conflict, it is not surprising that mainstream Israeli historiography worked for almost half a century to legitimize and consolidate the national memory by tracing the “main events” of what it described as the “process of nation building,” and by focusing on the “key players,” political and national leaders. The more recent, critical approach by a small group of “new historians” (for example, Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin) has attempted to present a more balanced account of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but has not reversed the tendency to focus on wars and political events. As a result, two alternative models of historical research have been largely neglected in Israel: social history and feminist history.

In a 1988 essay, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims,” Cultural Studies scholar Ella Shohat brought to light the direct link between the war in the Middle East, Zionist ideology, and conflicting intra-Jewish versions of social history.¹ Jews who emigrated to Israel from Arab countries after the 1948 war, Shohat argued, were victims of a Zionist ideology that orientalized them and accepted them into mainstream Israeli society only if they left behind their Arab identities. Israeli historiography subsumed the experience of displacement and relocation of these Arab Jews (more often known in Israel as Mizrahim or Sephardim) within the larger hegemonic Zionist narrative. Shohat’s work, and more recent critical historiographic work in Israel, has begun to explore the perspective of Arab-Jews in Israel.²

A historiography written to justify or contest the process of national identity building in times of war is also largely male-centered. Women enter such historical accounts only if they act in the public sphere as part of the male-centered effort of nation-building. For example, the feminist history that considers the role played by Jewish women pioneers³ or the more recent work that examines the resistance to male-centered militarism of organizations like Women in Black are both framed within a national Zionist narrative.⁴ Mizrahi or Arab-Jewish women in Israel do not belong to either of these categories. Locked within the same larger orientalist dis-

course that treats Mizrahi males as silent historical subjects in an Ashkenazi (European Jewish)-centered Zionist history, they have only recently begun to draw the attention of a few critical researchers who have challenged the hegemonic Eurocentric Zionist historiography. Indeed, a conference held at an Israeli university almost three years ago was the first to focus on the history of these Jewish “women of the East.”⁵ Thus, one of the first challenges in teaching about the history of Arab-Jewish women is the glaring lack of adequate teaching materials. But that is not the whole story. Even if we overcome such research lacunae and produce solid historical accounts about Arab-Jewish women in Israel, the reception of such teaching within the larger frames of academic knowledge remains a problem. In the rest of this essay I will discuss four questions that explore the challenge of teaching about the gendered Other in Israel in the context of war.

Who is the audience for such feminist teaching in times of war?

In a recent essay titled “Teaching the ‘Other,’” American feminist geographer Janice Monk argues that teaching students about the Other helps not only to develop tolerance of cultural difference among students but also to foster informed understanding, respect, and empathy.⁶ Indeed, for the majority Ashkenazi students in Israel, teaching about the history of Mizrahi women can serve as a lesson for developing tolerance, respect, and empathy. But what about the Mizrahi student body, often found in the less-prestigious newly established colleges? Are the few Mizrahi women students who make it to the ranks of university or college education more open, interested, and excited about learning about the social history and the present status of Mizrahi women than their Ashkenazi counterparts? The answer is, simply, NO. My experience of teaching in both universities and colleges in Israel has taught me that Mizrahi college students, males and females, are not better informed about Mizrahi Jewish history than Ashkenazi students. Nor is their initial reaction to a critical feminist and Mizrahi-centered interpretation of Israeli history less aggressive or less belittling. As a teacher, one has to overcome not simply the ignorance of these students but their entrenched resistance to the critical perspective offered through the study of history via gender and marginal/ethnic/non-hegemonic-focused analysis. Public discourse in Israel is so thoroughly orientalist and sexist that it has been internalized by all, including those against whom it is leveled—Mizrahim and women. The continuous war with the Arab Other encourages the effort to dissociate oneself from any links with Arab culture, language, or ways of being in the world. The association of “Arabness” with the hated enemy makes Mizrahi students furious with any attempt to link them or their families of origin with their Arab past.

I found that the main teaching challenge is to develop concrete strategies of overcoming, or working around and against, such internalized resentment in the student audience. Before addressing this challenge, I would like to turn first to the teacher, the one who is supposed to face such resentment and internalized fear of the Arab within us.

By whom?

It is not a secret that most university lecturers who teach feminism in women studies departments around the world are women. Any review of work published by feminists of color in the United States and Canada will demonstrate that women scholars of minority origin tend to focus their research and teaching on the intersection of gender, class, and racial lines of inequality.⁷ In Israel, work by Mizrahi women scholars began to appear only in the last decade. The few Mizrahi feminists who made it to academe are extremely marginalized. In researching and teaching about Mizrahi women, we face a blatant critique that argues that our work is irrelevant and too narrowly focused. My strategy has been to insert Mizrahi feminist historiography into larger frames of discourse. For example, when I applied for a research grant from a major Israeli research fund, I proposed to study the growing religiosity of Mizrahi women and argued for the importance of studying this phenomenon in light of the increasing power and visibility of religious political parties in the Israeli national arena. In my teaching I make sure not to title my class in ways that suggest that Mizrahi women are the main topic, but insert the subject into larger frames of academic concern. For example, in a course titled "Critical Perspectives on Development," I lead the students to understand that development and the idea of developing the "less-worthy others" is not merely a general Western discourse vis-à-vis the Third World, but that development discourse, with its paternalistic overtones, is employed within Israel toward the Other Jews, the Mizrahim. I link this critical perspective to feminist insights and encourage students to explore the position of Mizrahi women as subjects and as objects of knowledge.

What for?

According to liberal, multicultural discourse we should learn about the Other in order to develop empathy, tolerance, and understanding of those Others. I wish to go beyond this humanistic reasoning, which is not as naïve as it may sound, and propose that research about Mizrahi women, when carried out in a theoretically informed manner, entails theoretical and analytical bonuses that are necessary for good scholarship and for a more

sophisticated public discourse. Research and informed teaching that place Mizrahi women and their history at the center challenge key concepts in the accepted male-centered Eurocentric Israeli historiography. Elsewhere I demonstrated that an analysis of social history that begins with the narratives of Mizrahi women questions accepted definitions of key concepts such as Jewish labor, Jewish migration, and social equality.⁸ I also argued that research that focuses on the historical experiences of women who are marginalized due to their ethnicity, class, and gender calls for an analytical framework that considers several axes of social difference and challenges social analyses that consider only one axis of social difference. In other words, beginning from the perspectives of multiply marginalized Mizrahi women makes students understand the complexity of Israeli history, helps them develop analytical skills, and sensitizes them to critical thinking. Tolerance or compassion are by-products of such processes and not the end point of the learning process.

How? Strategies for teaching from the perspective of the gendered Other

Once we have 1. proper teaching materials, 2. a solid theoretical framework that is not apologetic but analytically sound, and 3. a clear awareness of the students we address and their preconceived ideas and structure of emotions, then we can begin to contemplate the How question. How do we go about teaching the histories of multiply oppressed Mizrahi women? A few concrete strategies drawn from my own teaching experience and developed over more than a decade offer a starting point.

A. I begin each class by establishing a solid theoretical framework within which the case of Mizrahi feminist social history is to be grasped. Specifically, I open my seminars with three dense lectures that lay out basic theoretical concepts: what is feminist scholarship, what kinds of feminist discourses exist today, and what is the difference between social history and history from above?⁹ Students become aware of the comparative and theoretical significance of the study of Mizrahi women and their history.

B. A second key teaching strategy is to personally engage students in exploring and bringing to class new materials that are found in unconventional places: interviews with mothers and grandmothers, deconstructive analysis of classical literary texts, and critical examination of popular women's magazines. The burden is on the students to unearth silenced, marginalized narratives. The seminar is structured around students' presentations followed by class discussions. This teaching strategy is particularly effective not only because there is little good published work that can be used as assigned reading for class but because the students discover for

themselves that what they are often exposed to in other classes is male-centered and orientalist.

C. Because the very attempt to speak about sexism and racism is an emotional as well as an intellectual and political issue, a lot of rage, pain, and aggressive denial of the issues raised often come to the fore in class. Students are directly positioned with relation to the subject discussed: they are Ashkenazi or Mizrahi, male or female, Jews or non-Jews. Moreover, the positioning of the lecturer is also important and must be made explicit. During the years I have been teaching, I have encountered direct verbal aggression when students (most often, but not exclusively, male students, both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi) confronted my authority claims, undermined my experimental, open, discover-for-yourself teaching methodology, and resisted the "non-scientific" nature of my feminist and critical thinking. I have sought difference ways of dealing with these emotions, theirs and mine. The most basic lesson I learned is that one must create some space for such anticipated expression of emotions.¹⁰

Conclusion

I have focused on the challenges of teaching and research from the perspective of Arab-Jewish women in Israel in times of war. A similar reflection should focus on the nature of research and teaching about and from the internally linked position of non-Jewish Israeli Arab women. A critical, politically informed analysis of the position of Arab Israeli women has been developed recently by feminist scholars like Manar Hassan and Nadira Shalhoub Kevorkian.¹¹ The first necessary step in feminist scholarship on these two groups of Other women in Israel is to develop a solid body of teaching material based on critical feminist research. As I argued above, however, the key challenge is to enable teachers to use this new research to transform the orientalist and male-centered prejudice of *all* students, males and females, Jews and Arabs, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi. Only by dismantling the nationalist, male-centered understanding of the world brought about and justified by the ongoing war in the region can we progress towards a discourse of mutual acceptance and peace.

NOTES

¹Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19, no. 20 (fall 1988).

²See, for example, Ella Shohat, "Rupture and Return: The Shaping of a Mizrahi Epistemology," *Hagar: International Social Science Review* 2, no. 1 (2001): 61–93; Hanan Hever, Yehouda Shenhav, and Pnina Motzafi-Haller, *Mizrahim in Israel: a*

Critical Observation into Israeli Ethnicity (Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute and HaKibbutz HaMeuchad publishing House, 2002); and Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews* (Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute and HaKibbutz HaMeuchad Publishing House, 2004).

³See, for example, Deborah Bernstein, *The Struggle for Equality: Urban Women Workers in Prestate Israeli Society* (New York: Praeger, 1987); and Bernstein, *Pioneers and Homemakers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

⁴A parallel model pertains to feminist historiographic writing that takes Palestinian women as its focus. Here, too, women's struggle is defined within the general national project of Palestinian liberation. See, for example, Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁵The book based on papers presented at that conference is still in press. See Tova Cohen and Shaul Regev, eds., *Women of the East, Women in the East* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, forthcoming).

⁶Janice Monk, "Teaching the 'Other': Linking Knowledge, Emotion, and Action in Geographic Education," *Hagar: Studies in Culture, Polity and Identities* 5, no. 1 (2004): 11–23.

⁷I had recently completed a review of feminist scholarship in Canada where I examined the ways in which such a body of work had attempted to deal with the question of difference among women, along lines of class, race, and national origin. See Pnina Motzafi-Haller, "Canadian Feminism and the Question of Difference: An Israeli Assessment" (manuscript under review). A moving review of the marginalized position of women of color in Canadian academe is provided in Rashmi Luther, Elizabeth Whitmore, and Bernice Moreau, eds., *Seen but not Heard: Aboriginal Women and Women of Color in the Academy* (Ottawa: CRIAW/ICREF Publication, 2001). I was particularly impressed with the work of Sherene Razack and Patricia Monture-Angus, two Canadian feminists. See Sherene Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); and Patricia Monture-Angus, "In the Way of Peace: Confronting 'Whiteness' in the University," in Luther, Whitmore, and Moreau, *Seen but not Heard*, 29–51. The work by women of color in the United States is vast. I had recently completed a review of the work of African American feminist scholar bell hooks in the context of the larger discourse of Black feminist thought in the United States. See Pnina Motzafi-Haller, "bell hooks: An African American Critical Feminist," in Niza Yanay et al., *Contemporary Feminist Thinkers* (Tel Aviv: The Open University Press, forthcoming), Hebrew.

⁸See Motzafi-Haller, "An Outline for a Critical Feminist Historiography in Israel," in Cohen and Regev, *Women of the East, Women in the East*.

⁹An excellent teaching text is Steven Seidman's *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory Today* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 2003). I also recommend Dhruvarajan Vanaja and Jill Vicker's more recent *Gender, Race and Nation: A Global Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

¹⁰A more serious model of teaching that pays direct and explicit attention to students' emotions involves a team of teachers, a sociologist as well as a psychologist. I am thinking here about a class taught in Sapir College by my friend and col-

league Daniel De Malach together with psychologist Ariela Beeri-Benishay. I am also familiar with feminist classes where the teacher reads students' diaries written in the course of the class. I must admit that I have not used these more explicit ways of dealing with the emotions the topic brings in class. I find that my academic training and my personality place a limit to the articulation of emotions in class.

¹¹See Nadira Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Towards a Cultural Definition of Rape: Dilemmas in Dealing with Rape Victims in Palestinian Society," *Women's Studies International Forum* 22, no. 2 (1999): 157-73; and Manar Hassan, "Murder of Women for 'Family Honor' in Palestinian Society" (master's thesis, University of Greenwich, 1995).