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Scholarship, Identity, and Power: Mizrahi Women in Israel

Once it is understood that subjects are formed through exclusionary operations, it becomes politically necessary to trace the operations of that construction and erasure.

—Joan Scott quoted in Nicholson 1995, 12

A Mizrahi feminist activist friend who heard me say that I planned to review the literature on Mizrahi women in Israel suggested that I read Patricia Hill Collins's book *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). "You will find it interesting," she said. She was right. I worked my way through Collins's brilliant book while amassing and closely examining (with the help of a small group of students) the scattered literature that has discussed, and more often ignored, Mizrahi women in Israel. Collins's powerful analysis is theoretically sophisticated and personally committed. As I read it, I realized that hardly any theoretical work that explores the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class has been produced in Israel. As I learned more 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 came to realize how Mizrahi women's intellectual work has been suppressed and was virtually invisible until very recently. I saw that much work lies ahead—we still have to find and express our voices and our ideas.

There are some beginnings, a few scattered articulations published in the more progressive academic literature and, more often, essays written by a few Mizrahi women that are internally circulated.¹ I would like to shed some light on this emerging Mizrahi feminist discourse, but before

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¹ Dahan-Kalev's essay about Mizrahi feminism, an essay that is cited below as a draft paper circulating among a few feminist scholars, was finally published in Hebrew in 1999.

doing this I wish to pose two questions: (1) Why is there such a small, hesitant, and little-known body of work on Mizrahi women as subjects—a body of work that places Mizrahi women at its center? (2) Why is it emerging only now, in the course of the past four or five years?

I would like to suggest that part of the answer to these questions 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 have been 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.

1. How are categories of knowledge defined in Israel and by whom?
2. 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 here is:

3. What do we learn from this focused case study, which explores the links between scholarship and identity, about multiple systems of domination and the way they define access to power and privilege and shape people’s identities and experiences in Israel and elsewhere?

Who are we talking about?

If I were to follow the accepted positivist style of mainstream Israeli scholarship, I would begin with a simple definition of our “subject matter,” something along these lines: “Mizrahim, also known as Sephardim or Orientals, 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 cite the thoroughly documented fact that Mizrahim in Israel constitute the lower socioeconomic 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 menfolk. Mizrahi women cluster at “the bottom of the female labor market, in service and production jobs” (Bernstein 1993, 195). I might then add that Mizrahim, especially those of the first generation of immigration, are “traditional people” and, turning to Mizrahi women, might speak about their unenviable position in patriarchal families. Following such a model implies, of course, that we are dealing here with a predefined social category—a segment of the population distinguished by their gender and place of origin.

My starting point for this article rejects such an essentialist model of identity. I opt for what Margaret Andersen and 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. Ethnicity and gender, I wish to argue here, are 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 they are 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 article is written to uncover the very process of silencing; its goal is to expose the exclusionary practices that have inhibited the emergence of an internal Mizrahi exploration of our own muted experiences.² "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" (quoted in Nicholson 1995, 12). I would like to focus this article on one arena of the wider process of such construction and erasure of Mizrahi women's subjectivity in Israel—academic discourse.³

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. The intellectual thought of Mizrahi women has to struggle against a double process of erasure and silencing that has combined to challenge its very right to exist. As *Mizrahiyot*, as the female members of a subordinated ethnic class, Mizrahi women intellectuals face hostile reactions to their very claim that *Mizrahiyut* is a viable basis for their action and thought.⁴ The negation of Mizrahi collective identity (*mizrahiyut*) as a basis for distinctive claims, material and symbolic, is a powerful one

² Here I draw on Spivak's argument in her provocative 1985 essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Such tracing of Mizrahi women's subjectivity might seem, at first glance, an essentialist practice, but it is necessary against the very powerful erasure of such claims by dominant discourses.

³ There are, of course, other sites where this process of erasure works itself out. Shohat's brilliant book *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989) is the most powerful exploration of this process within the Israeli film industry. Laor's 1995 and Rattok's 1997 work are examples of the erasure of the Mizrahi subject in Israeli literature.

⁴ For an analysis of Israel as an "ethnocracy," see Yiftachel 1997, 1998.

precisely because Mizrahim, as Jews, are said to be part of the Israeli national self.⁵ 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.”⁶ Their positioning at the margins of Israeli political, economic, and cultural life (a position reproduced for the third and fourth generation since immigration) is constructed as “temporary,” as a “problem” to be surmounted with good liberal policies of “lifting up.”⁷ 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 assertive Mizrahi voice to share its discursive space.⁸

Israeli feminist discourse, in turn, has not been able to free itself from the dominant, androcentric, Orientalist images of Mizrahi women that structured academic research and writing about Mizrahi women in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, since the early 1970s, the new feminist writing has replaced the limited, unabashedly paternalistic work carried out until the 1970s with silence. Within the growing body of feminist scholarship that has emerged since the mid-1970s, very little attention has been paid to the experience of Mizrahi women, and the existing work is largely untheorized. Why is this the case? Why has the 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 during the 1950s and 1960s with invisibility, with a vacuum? Before addressing these questions, let us return to the 1950s and to the insertion of Mizrahi women within the larger Orientalist discourse in Israel. The subject of my analysis is the interlocking dynamics of this double exclusion of Mizrahi women from the definition of “the Israeli,” the Ashkenazi male-speaking subject of sociological and historical research.

⁵ See Ram 1993b.

⁶ The Hebrew term is *Bea'aya*, or more often *HaBea'ya HaAdatit*—literally, “the ethnic problem.”

⁷ For a recent discussion about the reproduction of this interethnic gap over several generations, see Cohen and Habelfeld 1998.

⁸ The academic forum established at Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem in 1998 to develop critical perspectives on the study of culture and society in Israel challenged this state of the art by defining the research agenda for its first year as the study of Israeli society from Mizrahi perspectives.

"Women of the East"

The immigrant women from the Oriental countries were quite devoid of a consciousness directed towards emancipation and new life styles. They were, in fact, more backward even than their predecessors from the shtetl and were more oppressed, more culturally set than any previous settlers. . . . These Oriental women clearly would not, in that generation, anyway, be allies for their more established sisters.

—Natalie Rein 1979, 55

Sociological researchers' interest in Mizrahi women during the 1950s and 1960s was part of a larger academic discourse that expressed open paternalism toward the Jews of the East. The academic discourse of the time was inseparable from the aggressively Orientalist public discourse that constructed Ashkenazi Jews, who controlled the centralist institutions of power of the young state, as "Western" vis-à-vis the "Jews of Arab Lands," who in turn were viewed as people in need of transformation into "new Israelis" (the phrase one key woman sociologist—Rivka Bar Yossef—coined for this transformation is *desocialization and resocialization*). Although Mizrahim, as Jews, were part of the Zionist national community, their Jewish citizenship was conditional. For "they brought with them a religion primitive in its application and unaffected by the natural development of the time" (Rein 1979, 57). Barbara Swirski sums up the implications of this Orientalist perspective on academic and public-policy work in Israel: "While there are numerous studies of the disparities between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, the assumption of most Israeli sociologists and policy makers is that Mizrahim do not constitute a social group with legitimate claims" (1995, 2). If Mizrahim were constructed as backward "traditionalists," then their women were doubly so.⁹ "Traditional" Mizrahi women were constructed as "unable to function in a modern state, in a modern way" (Rein 1979, 57).

Studies of the time focused on what they viewed as the negative traits of the Mizrahi "traditional" woman who, unlike the imagined professional,

⁹ The Israeli case of constructing the "women of the 'Other'" as the absolute "traditional" Other for the constructed "Western" male-centered self may be placed within larger discussions of Western colonial practices. Anthropologist Laura Nader provides an insightful analysis of what she calls "the dynamics of male dogma operating in contemporary and interacting world systems." She notes that "images of women in other cultures act as a control to women in one's own society" (1989, 324). It could be interesting to examine this idea in the context of Israeli male-centered sociology. Was the "breeding machine" image of Mizrahi women used to control claims for equal citizenship by Ashkenazi women?

“progressive” “Israeli” woman (read: Ashkenazi, middle-class) was limited to her role as mother and wife.¹⁰ For example, in “Pregnancy—East and West,” published in the British journal *New Society* in 1966, Ester Goshen-Gottstein, a clinical psychologist from the Hadassah Medical School in Jerusalem, studied “the difference of attitudes to first pregnancy between Oriental . . . and Western women living in Israel” (299). While she notes that both Oriental and Western women may be motherly, her research “shows” that “the [woman] living in a modern marriage will tend to give child-centered reasons for wanting her first child”—unlike the Oriental woman for whom the child “often [represents] an avenue of compensation for the husband’s lack of attention” (299). The research also “found” that pregnant Oriental women are “selfish,” “self-centered,” and “narcissistic” (299).

Modernist models that posited two distinct cultural frames—“traditional” and “modern”—as master narratives within which the reality of the life of Jewish immigrant women in Israel was made meaningful were coupled with the strong influence of “culture and personality” theories dominant in American academe in these years. Research attention was thus directed at child-rearing practices within Mizrahi families. Ethnographic-like studies, such as that of Dina Feitelson published in the early 1950s, documented in detail the “primitive” child-rearing practices of mothers of the Kurdish community, who despite the best efforts of the “Israeli” nurses stuck to their unhealthy and unbecoming practices.¹¹ Working for the Israeli Ministry of Health, applied anthropologist Phylis Palgi collaborated with two psychologists to identify “typical personality disturbances” among immigrant Iraqi women in Israel of the 1950s (Palgi, Goldvasser, and Goldman 1955). These immigrant women, claimed the writers, exhibited dramatic “psychological scars” caused by the fact that they had not adjusted to “modern” life.¹² When “left almost to their own devices,”

¹⁰ Berkovitch 1999 argues that in Israeli legal and social discourses, women have been included within the national community mainly in their roles as mothers and wives. Were the mobile Ashkenazi women projecting onto the “women of the Other” the position from which they were struggling to escape? Gramsci’s analysis of the social dynamics of establishing “positional superiority” (1971) is particularly relevant at this point.

¹¹ Feitelson completed a Ph.D. dissertation on the topic, directed by Carl Frankenstein. Her published essay, based on her Ph.D. work, includes statements such as: “The nurses struggle [to convince these women] about nursing on regular hours, but even *the more enlightened mothers* do not comply” (1954, 106; emphasis added).

¹² In December 1998, during a conference on “Research among Mizrahi Women in Israel: Critical Feminist Perspectives” at Tel Aviv University, Palgi told me that her effort to link these women’s situation to wider cultural contexts was limited because the officials in the Ministry of Health (who financed such research) preferred to hire psychologists and not

writes another sympathetic observer, “they [Mizrahi women] became mere breeding machines and the butt of planners and politicians” (Rein 1979, 57).¹³ These studies do not mention the extremely alienating experience of these “disturbed” immigrant women in transition camps (*maabarot*), where they struggled to keep their families together and to survive in humiliating conditions for years before they could move into their permanent homes. There is also no reference to the varied social and cultural backgrounds of Mizrahi immigrant women—all were lumped into the “backward,” “primitive” stereotype.¹⁴

“Modern life” on the margins of Israeli society of the 1950s may, indeed, have caused psychological scars—not because of the assumed “traditional mind” of these Iraqi or Kurdish women but because of the humiliation and dehumanization these women experienced in the hands of those who sought to “save” them and their children. For the bitter irony is that, even in their limited roles as mothers and wives, Mizrahi women were found inadequate—not only as individuals but, more critically for the state, in their ability to prepare the next generation. Indeed, these studies (often invited and financed by the state) suggested a strong missionary-like zeal that called for acts of intervention by the state to prevent what was defined as the “cultural retardation” of Mizrahi children caused by their own mothers.¹⁵ Child psychologists built careers by advising the educational system how to “rescue” Mizrahi children from the “cultural backwardness” of their families. These children, a whole theory explained, were *teunei tipuah* (in need of fostering).

The concept *teunei tipuah* was used extensively in Israel in the late 1950s

anthropologists for the research. “I tried to do everything in this article of 1955,” she said after listening to my assessment of the kind of research work carried out in those years.

¹³ Note that the modernist tone of this Zionist nationalist discourse opens the space for a liberal critique of the state apparatus for its failure to “uplift” these less fortunate Mizrahi women.

¹⁴ For example, the group of Iraqi women at the center of Palgi and her research team was composed of highly educated women who scored “above average” on the intelligence test administered to them by the research group. The fact that the profile of this group of immigrant women clearly did not fit the reductive “traditionalist” model of immigrants from Arab lands did not alert the research group to the limitation of their modernist model.

¹⁵ An extreme expression of such paternalism and aggressive intervention is, of course, the horrible saga of the “disappearing children,” mostly from Yemenite families. The allegation that Yemenite babies were stolen from their parents and given for adoption to Ashkenazi families in Israel and abroad has periodically resurfaced into public discourse. A series of articles in *Maariv* in 1996 and several low-budget films completed in 1997 have not succeeded to make it a topic of serious scholarly examination. The politics of knowledge production in Israeli academe have yet to be systematically studied.

and 1960s, when it legitimized paternalistic educational policies that identified Mizrahi children as lacking in skills and abilities in comparison with their Ashkenazi counterparts. Dramatic changes in the Israeli social and political scene by the early and mid-1970s (the downfall of the Labor party hegemony because of massive Mizrahi vote for the opposition party, the national trauma after the 1973 war) and major theoretical shifts away from modernism and its belief in the redeeming power of national educational systems had little effect on the paternalistic, all-knowing, and corrective urge of this “in need of fostering” logic. On the contrary, when a Central Statistics Office publication assessed that almost a quarter (24.9 percent) of all women in Israel were “mothers with many children” (*imahot mrubot yeladim*) whose formal education consisted of zero–four years of schooling, the corrective paternalistic logic was employed with new zeal. 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 teunot tipuch* (women in need of fostering). The underlying logic of such work was unwavering: “the fault” was with the women themselves, who researchers described as passive, dependent, with low self-image and low self-esteem (Sharni 1973; Sharni and Avraham 1975). Based on these research “findings,” 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.

Orly Benjamin (1997), who reviews this body of work and cites many more examples of its extremely biased position,¹⁶ raises a critical question: Why dwell on such outdated examples of what is evidently bad research carried out almost two decades ago? Her answer is that more recent scholarship on Mizrahi women continues to use these outdated works because there has been no alternative work that describes Mizrahi women’s life experiences of mothering and work. Benjamin’s and my own review of the literature presented above have shown that recent feminist scholarship in Israel has replaced the Orientalist bias of earlier research on Mizrahi women with silence—Mizrahi women have simply dropped out of the range of research and academic interest. In the next section, I examine the few scholarly works that were carried out in Israel on Mizrahi women since the early 1980s. This short critical review raises for discussion some very

¹⁶ Benjamin provides a fuller review of the body of research work that sees Mizrahi women as “women in need of fostering.” She cites Fishbach 1974, Goshen-Gottstein’s 1978 articles published in *Megamot*, two other reports submitted by Sharni (1973, 1976), and two master’s theses written in the 1980s (Raz 1980 and Fridar 1981). The latter works, she explains, recycle the same paternalistic, policy-centered perspective because, for lack of any other data on Mizrahi women, they had to rely on these earlier sources.

penetrating questions about the relationships between hegemony, identity, and academic research. It also comments on the shortcomings of research focused on gender alone, research that ignores national, class, and ethnic divisions among women in Israel and elsewhere.

Women as subjects, women as objects

It is axiomatic that we tend to write mainly about ourselves.

— Barbara Swirski and Marilyn Safir 1993, 2

All in all, I have located five studies that make Mizrahi women their main subject of research. They have all been carried out by women anthropologists. Two of these research works (Katzir 1976; Gilad 1989) deal with Yemeni Jewish women;¹⁷ one (Wasserfall 1981, 1995) focuses on Moroccan women; one (Schely-Newman 1991) is concerned with the narratives of Tunisian women; and the last (Starr Sered 1987, 1992) explores the lives of pious Oriental women in Jerusalem.

When accounting for the limited range of academic work on Mizrahi women in Israel, one must begin by outlining the narrow scope of research on women in general in mainstream Israeli academe. Significant academic work about inequality along gender lines began to appear only in the mid-1970s. The first hesitant essays were concerned with establishing the legitimacy of their subject matter. They tried to dispel the very powerful myth that women in Israel have been equal partners to their menfolk in the process of founding a Zionist-socialist society.¹⁸ Bernstein depicts this state of affairs in the following way: "Until the mid-1970s, the status of women was a 'non-issue' in Israel. The general notion that women had been and still were equal prevailed in public opinion and was reflected in the absence of almost any academic study related to women" (1992, 10). In 1986, two Israeli writers, Dafna Izraeli and Ephrayim Tabor, explained that "Israeli social scientists writing about social problems, social conflicts, and social stratification have generally omitted any discussion of the status of women as problematic" (quoted in Bernstein 1992, 10). "After all," adds Bernstein,

¹⁷ Two other works about Yemeni women must be mentioned here: Druyan's book on Yemeni Jews, *Without a Magic Carpet* (1981), and a novel by Curt Leviant, *The Yemenite Girl* (1973). Women are seldom mentioned in Druyan's historical work. Leviant's novel is the best illustration of the objectification of Mizrahi (Yemenite) women by Ashkenazi male academics. The Yemenite maid in Leviant's story is never a real person but a metaphor, a fantasy for the middle-aged Ashkenazi men who struggle for academic fame.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Padan-Eisenstark 1973; Hazelton 1977; and Brandow 1980.

“sociological study was oriented primarily to ‘social problems’ and women’s status was not defined as one” (1992, 10).

By the early 1990s, however, such earlier feminist concerns gave way to an articulate, well-established, and internally varied feminist scholarship (Ram 1993a). Yet little of this academic research growth was directed toward Mizrahi (and Palestinian) women. Why?

In their introduction to *Calling the Equality Bluff*, Swirski and Safir lamented the fact that, despite their best efforts to “present readers with a broad perspective on women’s experience in contemporary Israeli society,” they had not created a book that provides an “equal or proportional representation of all social groups within Israeli society” (1993, 2). Among the forty articles assembled in their edited book, only two were written “by women who identify or write as Oriental Jews.” The editors account for this fact in a bold, unapologetic statement: “It is axiomatic that we tend to write mainly about ourselves,” and because “among women [in Israel], Ashkenazi Jewish women have the highest educational achievements . . . there has been considerable research on women in public service, the professions, academia and management, but almost no research on women employed as assembly-line workers or holding low-level office jobs” (1993, 2). The focus on the experiences of women like themselves by Ashkenazi scholars extends not only to their ethnic background but also to their class position. Swirski and Safir elaborate: “numerous studies have been made of women running for public office, but there are hardly any on grass roots organizing. Studies on women in kibbutzim abound, but there is almost nothing about women in development towns” (1993, 2).

This research focus on middle-class women and the absence of any work on lower-class and/or Mizrahi women in Israel is prominent in two other feminist anthologies published in the 1990s. One of these is Deborah Bernstein’s *Pioneers and Homemakers* (1992), an excellent collection that dispels many of the male-centered myths about prestate society; it includes only one essay, by Nitza Druyan, that examines the experience of Yemeni women.¹⁹ A second influential collection of essays—Yael Azmon and Israeli’s *Women in Israel* (1993)—remains focused on middle-class women and their mobility.²⁰ The most recent special issue of *Women’s Studies Inter-*

¹⁹ Druyan’s 1992 essay speaks about “Yemenite Jewish women” but is not informed by any feminist perspective. Like Druyan’s other work I have read (1981, 1985), it is framed within the modernist model that has dominated Israeli sociology in the 1960s and continues to inform noncritical historiographical scholarship in Israel to this day.

²⁰ Israeli acknowledges Ram’s critical assessment of her work by saying “my work has . . . focused more on middle-class women and their mobility” (quoted in Ram 1993a, 77).

national Forum, edited by Tamar Rapoport and Tamar El-Or (1997), does not seem to have reversed such a trend despite its stated goal to document “cultures of womanhood in Israel.” In fact, the first edited volume (published in Hebrew) to make an explicit effort to include Mizrahi and Palestinian feminist scholars writing about Mizrahi and Palestinian women appeared in December 1999.²¹

Swirski and Safir’s sincere attempt to explain the exclusivity of such research and scholarship by arguing “we write about ourselves” is correct but partial. I propose that a fuller consideration would examine the particular intersections of gender and ethnic domination in Israel. I suggest that images of Mizrahi women as passive, primitive, mere “breeding machines,” and so on, act to control the claim for equality by all women in male-centered Israeli discourse. As I argued above, Israeli feminist discourse has constructed itself in ways that fashion an ideal image of a woman who “deserves to be equal” by marking the distance of such a woman from those “other,” undeserving, “Oriental” women. Because they did not challenge the very basis of Orientalist reductionism and mainstream androcentrism, Israeli Ashkenazi feminists were forced to establish their claims of inclusion (in the androcentric labor, political, and public spheres) by overstating their distance from the undeserving “other women.”

This effort to broaden the gap that sets apart Ashkenazi women from Mizrahi, lower-class women is particularly explicit in mainstream academic writing, where Mizrahi women are never subjects. Rather, Mizrahi women are constituted as a category that illuminates, by contrast, features and characteristics of Ashkenazi women. In this comparative frame of research, Ashkenazi women continue to represent the modern “Israeli” self and are thus deserving to be treated equally to men. Take, for example, a recent study concerned with patterns of marriage and parenthood among “young women in Israel.” The woman researcher asserts early on 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*” (Stier 1995, 390; translated from Hebrew; emphasis added). She then proceeds to correlate marriage age with ethnic

²¹ The volume is jointly edited by all the contributors and thus makes a sincere effort to make the Mizrahi (Dahan-Kalev) and the Palestinian (Hasan) scholars part of the production of the volume and not mere invited guests. I would have liked to see one of the Ashkenazi scholars interrogate the meaning of *Ashkenaziyut* within Israeli feminist thought. The Ashkenazi scholars continue to write about “general” feminist topics such as “women in politics” (Herzog) or “gender in the labor force” (Israeli). Ethnicity and the way it intersects with other social lines of divisions remain distinct topics to be discussed by the “ethnic” feminists.

origin. The far-from-startling results of her statistical research, based on such a preconceived division between the two groups of women, confirm this “widely known” social fact. The tautological nature of the research design and argument is lost on the researcher.²²

Although voluminous scholarship provides evidence for the existence of inequalities along gender and ethnic lines, it seldom proceeds to explore how patterns of inequality in the larger political economy and history of Israel have shaped such experiences and have structured their reproduction over three generations. By representing, through the use of respected, academic jargon, the reality of the multiple marginality of Mizrahi women as an objectively given fact, these studies invite an acceptance of the status quo. In this view, Mizrahi women, even second- and third-generation Israeli-born women, are disadvantaged because they are locked into their position as victims of some frozen, unshakable “traditionalism.” Such mainstream scholarship contributes to the hegemonic discourse precisely because it explains nothing. Little sustained effort has been made to challenge systematically the epistemological and theoretical presuppositions of such a hegemonic, stubbornly modernist model.²³

²² Elsewhere (1998c) I have expanded on this critique of the modernist model that equates *Mizrahiyut* with “traditionalism” and *Ashkenaziyut* with an enlightened “West.” The simple-minded, all-inclusive logic of such progression from one type of society to the other, I argued, has yielded very limited and distorted scholarship for more than three decades in Israel. I have proposed (Motzafi-Haller 1996, 1998c) an alternative feminist and historically specific model of analysis for exploring the experiences of my mother’s generation — the generation of Mizrahi immigrants from Arab lands to Israel in the early 1950s — in its own terms. Instead of predefining what we came to study (that these “traditional” women’s lives were improved on their entry to “modern” Israel), I proposed to use two women-centered criteria: the woman’s direct control over material resources within the household, and the size and availability of her social network. When these two criteria are examined in their specific historical contexts, i.e., before and after the immigration, one might discover unexpected patterns. For example, while some Mizrahi women might have, in fact, lost control over resources and suffered a truncation in their supportive social networks (networks extending beyond the nuclear family), other Mizrahi women might have improved their social position and their power within their family units when they began to work outside their homes. The question, I insisted, is an empirically open issue and must not be assumed.

²³ The first critical work of mainstream Israeli sociology emerged in the late 1970s at Haifa University. Swirski and Bernstein (1993) used Marxist-socialist views and dependency theory models to challenge existing views about the position of Mizrahim in Israel. Their important work was largely marginalized. Swirski lost his academic position, and his insights were followed up neither by the recent wave of those who label themselves “New Historians” nor by the self-defined “Critical Sociologists” of the late 1980s and 1990s. Bernstein’s excellent work continues to explore feminist issues in historical perspectives (1992) but has had extremely little to say about Mizrahi women (see Bernstein 1993). Smootha’s 1978 model of pluralism does not include gender as a significant line of division in Israeli social reality.

Moreover, despite the obsessive recording, with never-tiring statistical data, of what is commonly 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 links these crosscutting lines of division. No serious effort has been made to describe more fully, much less explain, the reality emerging from multiple oppressions. The effort to reconceptualize critical dimensions of this dominant model and to expose its seemingly simple “scientific” representation of reality as being ideologically and culturally constructed has only begun — and it has begun, I wish to claim here, within the nascent Mizrahi feminist intellectual discourse.²⁴

“Reclaiming,” writes Collins, is “discovering, reinterpreting, analyzing in new ways despite the silencing mechanism of mainstream discourse” (1990, 13). The intellectual Mizrahi discourse I now turn to works against what Gayatri Spivak has called “social and disciplinary epistemic violence,” which is at work 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 to knowledge. The small community of scholars and activists who are engaged in Mizrahi intellectual feminist discourse have 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. To elucidate this point it may be helpful to examine briefly what I call the “political economy” of the small, emerging group of women intellectuals of Mizrahi and Ashkenazi origin who make up the core of contemporary Mizrahi feminist discourse.

The political economy of an evolving discourse

The first notable characteristic about these women intellectuals is that they do not hold central positions in the mainstream Israeli academic world.²⁵

²⁴ The essays collected in Ram’s *Israeli Society: Critical Perspective* (1993b) work toward developing a critical analysis of the existing academic framework. Yet aside from one article by Shohat, nothing is directly related to Mizrahi women scholarship, even in this pathbreaking work.

²⁵ This is not to say that other feminist women in Israel (all Ashkenazi) have had an easy time in establishing themselves in Israeli academe. I would like to quote here the useful comments of one of the anonymous reviewers of this article, who wrote: “starting in the mid ’80s many female scholars who had achieved more secure positions began to call themselves feminists. However their status was achieved in mainstream topics. If women were research

The few who were able to establish their academic careers were able to do so in the United States, not in Israel. One filmmaker and activist lives in Paris. Those of us who hold academic positions within Israel are marginalized: we are all nontenured, and our political and social activism is frowned upon. A few of us found our places outside academe in nongovernmental grassroots organizations.

The nascent Mizrahi feminist discourse this small group of intellectual women is engaged in has very few avenues of publication and thus limited exposure to wider audiences. Most Mizrahi feminist writing appears in radical, little-circulated journals in the form of short nonacademic essays and interviews (e.g., in the Israeli feminist journal *Noga*, in the radical Mizrahi-centered publication *Iton Akher*, and in two left-leaning publications of the Alternative Information Center—*News from Within* [English] and *MiTzad Shenit* [Hebrew]).

Questions of representation and the position of the knower within the representation act are central to the evolving Mizrahi feminist discourse. One of the more interesting outcomes of these questions is the blurring of the lines that distinguish academic from activist spheres. The same women, as we shall see below, who organize and shape feminist conferences and workshops are those who link theory to practice. Academic analyses and popular writings that strive to understand Israeli realities have been closely linked with explicit and passionate efforts to change such realities.

topics, they were not studied from a feminist perspective. . . . Most women who were 'out' as feminists did not receive tenure. . . . In general, it takes women at least twice as long to move up the academic career ladder, when they play the game." I also agree with this reviewer that the academic careers of feminist/activist scholars suffer not merely because of their gender but also because of their social activism. I would like to insist, however, that the ethnic background of Mizrahi women scholars is an *added, critical* factor in the general framework presented by the reviewer. We have so few Mizrahi feminist women in academe not because we are stopped at the door of academic institutions due to our ethnic background but because so few of us ever make it to such a door. Bernstein 1993 records that only 2.1 percent of Mizrahi women have an academic degree; among Ashkenazi women the equivalent ratio stands at 15.6 percent. Moreover, the few of us who had earned our Ph.D.s have none of the insider connections (as daughters, neighbors, etc.) needed to enter the "old boy" Ashkenazi-centered academic circles in Israeli universities. Hiring procedures in Israel, as I have learned over the past few years, do not even pay lip service to proper, equal access standards; affirmative action principles, or even unofficial social sensitivities to balanced gender and ethnic representation, are unheard of.

Mizrahi intellectual feminist discourse

Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.

—Audre Lorde 1984, 42

One of the earlier and most articulate voices to examine feminist theory in its Israeli context is that of Vicki Shiran. A legal scholar with many years of activism in Mizrahi and feminist circles, Shiran is not only an articulate, original thinker and writer, she is also one of the key people who helped reshape Israeli feminism and Mizrahi consciousness. In 1991, in a three-part essay published in *Iton Akher* entitled "Feminist = Rebel," Shiran laid out her thesis about what it meant to be a feminist in Israel in the 1990s. Shiran began her analysis by portraying the sad state of Israeli feminism: very few women in Israel defined themselves as feminists, and substantive ideas about women's liberation had not taken root and had not created a fertile ground for thinking and action among Israeli women. In the wider Israeli public discourse, feminism was ridiculed and its political and social importance diminished. Shiran, from her position as a Mizrahi feminist, espoused a radical, not a reformist or conservative, brand of feminism. Most of those who defined themselves as feminists in Israel, she observed, focused their struggle on getting more of the cake (e.g., more women in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament) and therefore, in Shiran's view, "played into the hands of the oppressor and contributed to the reproduction of the status quo" (Shiran 1991, 26). Her radical stand stemmed from her position as a Mizrahi Jew in Israel. Shiran refused to play the role of the "token Mizrahi woman" in the mostly middle-class, Ashkenazi feminist circles in Israel.

Shiran is not alone in her observation²⁶ that the core of the Israeli feminist movement is made up of middle-class, Ashkenazi Jewish women. Thus Katya Azoulay writes that Israeli women's 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" (1991, 17).²⁷ Swirski traces the grave outcome of

²⁶ See similar arguments advanced in Azoulay 1991; Swirski 1993; Dahan-Kalev 1997b; and Motzafi-Haller 1997a, 1998a.

²⁷ Naomi Wolf in her recent 1994 book *Fire with Fire* makes the same argument with regard to the American feminist movement.

this state of affairs. She argues that one of the reasons for the failure of the Israeli feminist movement to become relevant to the majority of Israeli women has been “its general failure to recognize or relate to other glaring inequalities in Israeli society: between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, and between Jews and Arabs” (1993, 299). “Over the last decade,” Swirski notes in 1993, “the agenda of the major feminist organizations has become *even more* middle class and less relevant to the majority of Israeli women” (300). Henriette Dahan-Kalev (1997b) points to the double standard of middle-class Ashkenazi feminists who focus on politically correct issues such as demonstrations for peace, or for advancing the cause of lesbians or Palestinian women, but never struggle for the needs of low-income Mizrahi women.

Shiran extends this criticism of the narrow focus of mainstream Israeli feminism by insisting that the question of Mizrahi and Palestinian women and their oppression must alter the very nature of feminist analysis in Israel. Shiran (1991, 1996), Ella Shohat (1996), myself (1996, 1997d), and Dahan-Kalev (1997a, 1999) 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 in comparison to these women and is often oppressed by them” (1991, 26). When a serious analysis of the crosscutting lines of gender, ethnicity, and class is attempted, the simple call for “Israeli sisterhood” is critically questioned. Shohat is most explicit: “any attempt to tell us there is one homogenous feminism, is an effort to silence us” (1996, 26).

Shiran offers a probing focused examination of the meaning of acting in a world of multiple crosscutting lines of gender, ethnicity, and class divisions (1997, 6–8). She describes her involvement in an affirmative-action legal proposition recently presented to the Knesset. As a member of the committee for advancement of women in government services (and as the only token “Mizrahi” in the committee, she notes), Shiran found herself in a contradictory position. The legal 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-level ranks are occupied largely by Jewish Ashkenazi men; the second-level ranks are filled by Mizrahi men and Ashkenazi women. These Mizrahi men, Shiran reminds us, are part of the households of many Mizrahi women. If she supported her “Ashkenazi sisters’” struggle for advancement, was she not undermining her, and other Mizrahi women’s, eco-

monic interests? In advocating such ethnic-blind feminist advantage, was she not contributing to the increasing gap between Mizrahi and Ashkenazim? Shiran's insights about this set of contradictions is illuminating. She points out that the very definition of the struggle (for advancement in the five highest-ranking government positions) is a reflection of the limited, intraclass and intraethnic group nature of contemporary Israeli feminist political agenda. In Shiran's view, a committed agenda for social equality would have redefined such struggle and extended it to all governmental posts or placed its priority on middle-range posts where most women, Mizrahi as well as Ashkenazi, find themselves. Another direction for developing a wider political agenda for equality, she argues, could have been to redefine the very criteria for job advancement in ways that would be more inclusive of Mizrahi. For example, if one takes into consideration the gap in formal education between Mizrahi and Ashkenazim, a call for a more flexible requirement for advancement to top managerial positions (one based on a track record that demonstrates leadership and creativity, rather than on an adherence to certificates and formal education) might open the way of advancement for less academically qualified Mizrahi men and women.

In 1993, 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 symmetric representation to Mizrahi and Palestinian women. A year later, the system of equal self-representation was extended to lesbians. The entry of non-Ashkenazi women in significant number and visibility into the organized feminist circles ushered in a new era in the hitherto dormant, elitist feminist discourse.²⁸ In 1994, Mizrahi women took an active part in the planning of the ninth Israeli feminist conference. The difference was felt immediately. For the first time, workshops that focused on Mizrahi women and their needs were convened. Mizrahi feminists invited the Ashkenazi women to discuss their own position as Ashkenazim and to explore their own unacknowledged racist views.²⁹

²⁸ According to Dahan-Kalev (1997a), efforts to include the Mizrahi agenda were there from the beginning. Dahan-Kalev cites Bracha Seri, who noted that the few Mizrahi women who were part of the organized feminist circles (e.g., in 1984 there were 255 registered women in the national feminist movement; only four were Mizrahi) tried several times to raise Mizrahi issues but were always marginalized.

²⁹ I attended such an innovative workshop led by Erella Shadmi in 1995. Shadmi led Ashkenazi women who spoke about their own experiences as Ashkenazi in contemporary Israel. What I heard in this workshop was indeed a unique voice in the larger Israeli discourse that posits Ashkenazi experience as transparent. In a televised interview in the program *Mabat*

From “Together: Despite Differences” to “We Are Here and This Is Ours”³⁰—articulating a Mizrahi feminist agenda

The act of using one’s voice requires a listener — a listener that is able to go beyond the invisibility created by objectification as the other.

— Patricia Hill Collins 1990, 98

The time of liberation is . . . a time of cultural uncertainty, and most crucially, of signifiatory or representational undecidability.

— Homi Bhabha 1994, 35

The heated discussion about the nature of Israeli feminism reached a new, explosive level at the tenth annual feminist conference when two hundred Mizrahi lower-class women flooded the conference, invited in by the grass-roots organization Hila. Israeli feminists were directly confronted with the question of class and ethnic divisions in ways they could no longer ignore; the question exploded right in their “front yard,” during their own yearly convention. *Mitzad Sheni* published the reflections of several women — Mizrahi and Ashkenazi — about the explosive event in the conference and its significance.³¹ Several women who were instrumental in organizing the lower-class Mizrahi women’s controversial presence at the conference claimed that the Mizrahi women were humiliated by the Ashkenazi organizers. The lower-class Mizrahi women, who had never before made their appearance in such conferences, faced blunt paternalism that went as far as to instruct them what they should and must not discuss in the conference. Tikva Levi, manager of Hila, said: “I personally witnessed paternalistic statements such as: ‘don’t speak about your oppression by the hands of Ashkenazi establishment. Focus on your oppression by the hands of Mizrahi men’” (quoted in Madmoni 1996, 22). Vera Krako depicted 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, councilors. These were the women who send their children to special education

Nashi in 1998, known liberal feminists Yael Dayan and Shulamit Aloni expressed this very position when they rejected my challenge that, if I am to be defined as Mizrahi in Israeli reality, they must hold and explore their Ashkenazi and not merely “Israeli” identities.

³⁰ The first was the central motto of the ninth feminist conference; the second was the motto for the first 1995 Mizrahi feminist conference.

³¹ The following quotations are all from an open discussion recorded and published in the August 1996 issue of *Mitzad Sheni*. See Eliezer et al. 1996.

and vocational schools out of the distorted, racist perception of the Mizrahi population. It is obvious to everyone that [once channeled into such vocational schools] these kids could never reach 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, and a juvenile delinquent. (quoted in Eliezer et al. 1996, 5)

This volatile encounter between middle-class feminists and the unwelcomed 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 clitoridectomy in Africa, such feminism 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. Says Levi: "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" (quoted in Eliezer et al. 1996, 4).

I participated in that first Mizrahi feminist conference only a few months after my return to Israel after seventeen years of academic exile in the United States and was carried away with the euphoria. The conference adopted the motto "We Are Here and This Is Ours."³² Levi expressed the feeling encapsulated in the motto when she described how in the past she was ashamed to bring her own Iraqi-born mother to feminist conferences. "She is a real Arab," she explained (quoted in Eliezer et al. 1996, 7), alluding to the unbecoming, "shameful" connotation such Arab appearance (her mother is a Jew) entails in the dominant Israeli scene. Now (in the Mizrahi feminist conference), she beamed, she would not only invite her mother to come, but she was certain that her mother would actively participate in workshops. Dahan-Kalev put the same idea forward in her opening remarks: "This conference will enable Mizrahi women to come here without leaving part of their identity 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" (quoted in Madmoni 1996, 23).

Indeed, the conference, which convened on the second weekend in May 1996 at the Green Beach Hotel in Natanya, was the first open exploration of Mizrahi feminist voices. There were about four hundred Mizrahi women, including Ethiopian, Arab, and Ashkenazi women who were

³² In Hebrew, *Anahnu Poh VeZeh Shelanu*.

invited to join the Mizrahi agenda. There were workshops on “Educating Our Children,” “The Role of Mizrahi Women in Initiating Social Change,” “Mizrahi Medicine,” and “The Unerasable Past.” There was a session conducted in Amharic, a workshop on Mizrahi music, one on “how to look at eye-level at teachers/clerks/bosses,” and more. The conference was hailed as a turning point in Israeli feminism. Several elated participants and observers declared that the conference placed a wider agenda of the struggle for equality at the center and has thus redefined the very nature of Israeli feminism.³³

But the conference also exposed and demanded critical rethinking of several key questions that remain painfully unresolved. In the aftermath of the conference, a deeply self-aware and introspective evaluation of the goals and limitations of the emerging Mizrahi feminist agenda was articulated. This recent discourse should be commended for its courageous effort to raise to the surface and face internal contradictions inherent in identity-based politics. What is Mizrahi feminism? Who has the right to represent it? What is the main agenda of such a Mizrahi voice? Or do we have multiple voices? The act of self-revelation, as Audre Lorde has argued, has been indeed “fraught with danger” for Mizrahi feminists. But, as the following examination of the nascent Mizrahi feminist intellectual discourse and action reveals, the journey from silence to self-valuation is an important effort to reject external definition of the experience, history, and identity of Mizrahim in Israel. What I wish to interrogate here is not simply the debates at the center of such emerging discourse but “the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed” (Bhabha 1994, 47).

Representations

Like many other controversial issues, the question of who can articulate and represent the Mizrahi voice was thrown into the open by Shiran. Shiran raised the question in her biting comments on an essay published in *Mitzad 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 analyze the shape and meaning of the emerging Mizrahi feminist thought within a framework of global feminist trends and theories.³⁴

³³ See Madmoni 1996. Madmoni quotes Smadar Lavi, Dahan-Kalev, and others.

³⁴ Shiran 1996 argues that the academic style the essay adopts is pretentious, for despite its highly theoretical language the essay does not provide proper references, citations, etc., that would have supported its style.

Shiran objected to the position claimed by Dagan as the “theoretician” of Mizrahi feminism. “Who does she represent in her seemingly historical review?” asked Shiran pointedly. “What is her [Dagan’s] 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?” (1996, 27). Shiran has no doubt that by positing a political, rather than an ascriptive, definition of the category of Mizrahi feminism, Dagan aims to dismantle the Mizrahi collective, appropriate its message, and (without identifying herself) speak in its name.³⁵

The “Dagan incident” enables us to explore the more general, complex relationships between Mizrahi women intellectuals and Ashkenazi feminist women on the one hand, and between Mizrahi intellectuals and the majority lower-class Mizrahi women on the other. It also leads to an interrogation of the boundaries of the collectivity defined at the crossing lines of gender and ethnicity.

Mizrahi feminism and Ashkenazi women

Dagan is not the only non-Mizrahi woman to take part in the discourse and the political action related to Mizrahi feminism. Tikva Honig-Parnas, the editor of *News from Within*, explained her commitment to Mizrahi feminism from her particular position as an Ashkenazi woman 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” (1996, 35). Honig-Parnas explains the political and ideological choices she made on her way to become an ally of Mizrahi feminism 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 the “working class” in the eyes of the traditional left in the world and in Israel also misses the racial dimension. Here in Israel we saw an “abstract worker” (and thus Ashkenazi) and resolved that as long as the national Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not resolved, there is no chance in joining the social-class struggle. All this, while most of the working class [in Israel] is Mizrahi, and while one cannot

³⁵ Spivak 1985 makes a general argument that fits this particular Israeli case when she doubts the ability of what she calls “intellectuals of the first world” to “let the subaltern people speak.”

distinguish between his “class” and his cultural-identity oppression. That’s how I became a Mizrahi feminist. (1996, 35)

Another Ashkenazi woman who was engaged in organizing the Mizrahi conference stated: “I feel tremendously privileged to be part of this gathering, particularly as an Ashkenazi woman.” She went on to explain that her work for the Mizrahi feminist cause enabled her to act against what she called “Israeli racism that was inculcated into me” (cited in Madmoni 1996, 23). Prior to the first Mizrahi conference, Levi, manager of the Hila nongovernmental organization (NGO), 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 members of the committee organizing 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 ethnic origin basis? This is racism” (quoted in Eliezer et al. 1996).

The voices quoted above make it amply clear that the direction taken by Mizrahi feminists in Israel is not toward a rigid, essentialist, ethnocentric definition of membership. Levi (in Eliezer et al. 1996) and Shohat (1996) speak clearly about a political identification,³⁶ not about a limited, narrow, and ascriptive membership. The issue, if we go back to the Dagan incident, is not one of individual identity; it is one of 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. Shiran calls on Dagan to write from her position as a member of the hegemonic group and *in relation* to Mizrahi women, not *about them*. Shiran’s positions resonate with Collins’s ideas and lead to a similar resolution. Collins poses the question, “who can be a black feminist?” (1990, 33). She rejects the essentialist, ascriptive idea (that all African-American women are black feminists by virtue of their biology) but equally rejects the purely idealist analysis that presents membership as a conscious political choice by any person, regardless of her background, worldview, and experience. In resolving the tension between these two extreme positions, Collins directs her attention to the centrality of black women intellectuals in producing black feminist thought. The argument—as relevant for the Israeli scene as it is for the American realities Collins analyzes—is that the concrete experiences of Mizrahi (and American black) women intellectuals as members of specific ethnic, racial, class, and gender groups necessarily

³⁶ Says Shohat: “our definition of Mizrahi feminism is inclusive and is not limited to the spheres of experience; it also concerns political consciousness” (1996, 32).

play a significant role in our understanding of the world.³⁷ Despite the divisions and variations among us, says Shiran, we all share memory and a similar historical experience. What is needed at this point, Mizrahi women intellectuals assert, is a safe space where we can discuss such history and painful memory and internally interrogate the difficult questions that link our position as oppressed and oppressors (*vis-à-vis* non-Jewish populations).

The call for creating a collective space where Mizrahi issues will be discussed in relative security, without the need to explain or apologize, was made by several Mizrahi feminists. Levi articulated the very need to organize a feminist conference separate from the "general" conference as a conscious decision intended to create a space where "we can clarify for ourselves what is Mizrahi feminism" (1996, 5). The workshops planned for the first Mizrahi feminist conference, said Levi, were intended to initiate a process of consciousness-raising because "it is time we should discuss among ourselves these topics" (1996, 7). Similarly, in Shohat's multicultural feminist framework, although people with the right "political identity" can join the group of committed intellectuals, discussions and clarifications of "our dilemmas" must be carried out in a framework that is safe, where, in Shohat's words, "we would not have to fend off negative images and hostile attacks" (Shohat 1996, 24). Shohat's analysis comes full circle to the same point raised by Shiran about the need for internal debate as a necessary phase to be completed before a more secure Mizrahi feminist agenda is developed. The hope, articulated by several Mizrahi intellectual women, has been for autonomy for the Mizrahi feminist movement and not for separation. Autonomy, to paraphrase Collins (1990), is needed in order to create a safe, creative space of cultural and social redefinition; autonomy stems from a recognition of internal strength, unlike separation, which is motivated by fear.

Unfortunately, the hopes that the first Mizrahi feminist conference would enable internal interrogation and a feeling of empowerment were largely defeated. In the aftermath of the conference, Simonne Biton, Shiran, Shohat, and others lamented that the conference missed the opportunity

³⁷ My use of Hill Collins's insights here does not suggest that I make direct structural parallels between the positioning and politics of African-American women in the United States and Mizrahi women in Israel. In many ways, the positioning and discourse of Chicano women in North America is more relevant to the Mizrahi case. I wish to thank Nira Yuval-Davis, who alerted me to this point. I spoke about my own contradictory positioning as both a native scholar writing about Mizrahim in Israel and a foreign scholar in my work in Africa in my 1997 essay. Recently, I have begun to explore Middle Eastern feminist discourses and have found interesting insights relevant to my current exploration in this body of work as well. See Motzafi-Haller 2000.

of developing an autonomous Mizrahi voice precisely because of the presence of Ashkenazi and Palestinian women at the conference. "We should not hide behind the broad back of what we call 'the Ashkenazi women racism,'" Shiran wrote in her painful introspective 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" (1996, 28). The presence of the Ashkenazi and Palestinian women in the conference, Shiran argued, prevented the emergence of such internal, difficult interrogation because we engaged in battling these women instead of dealing with our own issues. Mizrahi women used the Ashkenazi women in the same way as they were used by the Ashkenazi women in the Ashkenazi-centered yearly feminist conferences. Shiran claimed: "we wanted to 'show them' who is in charge here, it was a show of force not an exchange" (1996, 28). 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" (1996, 21).

Shohat, like Shiran, adopts a composite model that views ascriptive identity as the basis for a distinctive, political identity. Inspired by the multicultural discourse, Shohat speaks about the need for internal work to consolidate group solidarity. Only once such work is complete can coalitions based on proper analysis of the connections among gender, class, nationality, race, and religion emerge. Unlike Shohat and Shiran, Honig-Parnas 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" (1996, 34).³⁸

Mizrahi feminism and Palestinian women

The issue of Mizrahi-Palestinian relations exploded with a big bang in the midst of the first Mizrahi feminist conference. During the conference, a Mizrahi popular singer, Margalit Tzanaani, introducing one of her songs, spoke about "Jerusalem—the eternal capital city of the Jews." Her comment brought to the surface the delicate position of the Palestinian women who were invited into the conference and the diverging political views among the Mizrahi women of varied backgrounds. Ambivalence about the Palestinian question was there from the beginning. In planning for the conference, explained one of the organizers, a conscious choice was made not to discuss the issue of Palestinian nationalism. "We thought it is too early to deal with the issue in this first conference," said Levi. "One needs to explore these issues in great depth and not with slogans" (quoted in

³⁸ An excellent discussion that compares Mizrahi feminist views with bell hooks's radical feminist thought is offered in Shamai 1997.

Eliezer et al. 1996, 7). The slogans, she observed, might arouse the objection of the participants before any real and deep examination of the issue was performed. For anyone familiar with the Israeli scene, Levi's comment and her hesitation to introduce the Palestinian question into the agenda 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 choice 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 fronts, I do not share such reading of Levi's choice and the agenda set by the other Hila activists who took part in organizing the first Mizrahi feminist conference. Says Mira Eliezer (another Hila member) in the panel convened prior to the Mizrahi conference: "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'—a middle-class Ashkenazi peace movement] people do not live with Arabs. Those who live in the mixed towns are predominately Mizrahim. They tell us Mizrahim are rightist, while the settlements are resided mainly by Ashkenazim from the U.S." (quoted in Eliezer et al. 1996, 7). Adds Levi: "we must mention the hypocrisy of Meretz [a left-of-center party; most of its constituency is urban and kibbutz middle-class Ashkenazi] people who argue against us that Mizrahim hate Arabs. It was them [Meretz people] 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" (quoted in Eliezer et al. 1996, 7). Be that as it may, the choice not to directly examine Mizrahi-Palestinian relations at the conference had backfired. The decision was made to invite Palestinian women as welcomed guests, but there was no effort to create a specific agenda that interrogated Palestinian women's issues or to create a space for a distinctly Palestinian voice in the conference. Amal Alsaneh, a Palestinian student of social work at Ben-Gurion University, wrote about her experience at the conference: "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" (Alsaneh 1996, 25).

The Mizrahi women, concurred several Mizrahi activists in the aftermath of the conference, exhibited the same racist attitudes and exclusionary practices toward the Palestinian women that they had experienced at the hands of Ashkenazi women. Biton expressed this position powerfully

in her essay “Oppressed and Oppressors”: “We know better than any group in Israeli society what oppression is because we are simultaneously oppressors and oppressed,” she writes. “We are oppressed as women and as ‘Frankiyot,’³⁹ as ‘women in need of fostering,’ as ‘house maids’ as ‘prostitutes’ and more. We are oppressors because we are part of the ruling group as Jewish women and Zionists” (1996a, 26). Biton figuratively articulated the entangled position of Mizrahi and Palestinian oppressions in this historical moment in Israel: “if indeed we have managed to rescue a few Mizrahi kids from the disadvantaged educational path, we have also succeeded in securing for that [Mizrahi] child a future of an oppressor and military occupier” (1996a, 26). She laments the fact that although the all-Mizrahi feminist conference was successful in silencing the paternalism of Ashkenazi women, it failed to create a space where Arab women could feel safe to speak. Biton, like Shiran, does not see weakness in the need to examine the Mizrahi position as oppressors of Palestinian women. She views such interrogation as a necessary step for a stronger, more coherent Mizrahi feminist agenda. The emerging Mizrahi feminist discourse will become the most radical and progressive voice in Israeli leftist discourse, projects Biton, only when it will fight oppression in all its articulations—the kind we are victims of and the kind that grants us a privileged position (1996a).

Intra-Mizrahi class divisions

The distinct class position held by Ashkenazi women vis-à-vis Mizrahi women and its implication for Israeli feminist agenda has been discussed above. Little has been said, however, about intra-Mizrahi class divisions. Shiran posits the question in her direct, uncompromising way: “it is easy for us (Mizrahi women) to talk about the ‘Ashkenazi boss who exploits her Mizrahi maid,’ but is the Mizrahi boss less exploitative of her Mizrahi maid?” (1996, 28). As we have seen above, the tensions that emerged in the tenth conference were related not only to the large presence of the Mizrahi women organized by Hila but also to the class background of these Mizrahi women. The feminist organizers argued that these women, who came with their many children, saw the conference as an opportunity to have a weekend at a bargain price. One of the conference organizers was alleged to have paternally proposed to arrange another weekend for these lower-class Mizrahi women, with a few workshops thrown in to educate them about feminism. Yet, as Shiran notes with great pain, the woman who made that paternalistic comment was a Mizrahi feminist who, unlike the two hundred Mizrahi “invaders,” was of middle-class background and

³⁹ A pejorative term in Yiddish for Mizrahi Jews.

had been a veteran activist in the mostly Ashkenazi-organized feminist movement. Shiran is aware that Mizrahi women are not made of one skin and that "we have many faces and contradictions." The Mizrahi feminist conference, she had hoped, would create a safe space that would deal precisely with these internal contradictions. The conference brought together Mizrahi women who were "rightist and leftist, religious and secular, academics and those with no formal education, from the center and the periphery" (1996, 28). A sincere internal debate that would directly deal with intra-Mizrahi divisions, Shiran projected, would not be easy, but it would be extremely important. For cutting through the many lines of divisions within the Mizrahi community there is a shared experience and a collective memory that unify us. Shiran laments the fact that the opportunity for such internal discussion was not realized during the first Mizrahi feminist conference.

Dahan-Kalev touched on the issue of intra-Mizrahi divisions along class and educational background when she wrote that despite her initial excitement she found the Mizrahi conference "populist." There was a fear among the organizers of the conference, contends Dahan-Kalev, that abstract discussions about the nature of Mizrahi feminist thought might be "above the head" of poor Mizrahi women (1996, 27). She insists that such internal paternalism led to populism and inhibited a serious discussion about the meaning of Mizrahi feminism.

Hila activists seem to be quite clear about the nature of Mizrahi feminism and its goals. The preparation for the first Mizrahi conference took six intensive months, during which a coherent Mizrahi feminist agenda was developed. Mizrahi feminism is viewed as a liberatory process that engages both men and women in the community. The centrality of multiple oppressions was emphasized. Eliezer says: "One must remember that feminism is first and foremost a struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors. Feminism must fight all oppressions. As long as Ashkenazi feminism does not get up to shout: 'there is an oppression of Mizrahim' we have nothing to do with them" (quoted in Eliezer et al. 1996, 5). The feminist agenda of Hila activists such as Levi and Eliezer has focused on direct work with Mizrahi lower-class women at the grassroots level. Activists help these lower-class women to identify their special needs and interests and encourage them in developing their own leadership potential. Mizrahi feminism, according to Hila activists, does not exclude men. Levi puts it bluntly: "we do our feminist work with our men" (quoted in Eliezer et al. 1996, 6).

Unlike Shiran, who posits the intra-Mizrahi division along class lines, and unlike Dahan-Kalev, who challenges the Hila activists to make their

own role as organizers and mediators visible, Levi and Eliezer insist on positing a uniform Mizrahi women constituency and thus avoid the question of intra-Mizrahi variability. They focus on the oppression of Mizrahi women as part of the larger, class-based oppression of Mizrahim in Israel. "In terms of our class position," argues Eliezer, "we are in a different ball game from the Ashkenazi women. We do not hold key positions [in Israeli society and economy] as they do" (1996, 6). The Mizrahi community Eliezer posits is uniformly lower class. "There are well-educated Mizrahi women who attained higher economic status," she admits toward the end of a long open debate, "but they paid, on the whole, a very high price by denying their Mizrahi and Arab heritage" (1996, 6). A recently completed master's thesis (Nagar-Ron 2000) set out to examine precisely this: how have upwardly mobile Mizrahi women who defined themselves as feminist experienced the openly Orientalist reality of life in Israel, and how can we understand Mizrahi women not as the mere exotic Other of the Israeli male or female "Western" self but as subjects who define their lives? The question of intra-Mizrahi variability has only begun to be examined.

Intellectual discourses and the reshaping of academic agenda

For identification, identity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality.

—Homi Bhabha 1994, 51

The emerging intellectual Mizrahi feminist discourse is a vibrant, eclectic, and deeply courageous discourse. It has raised for public debate critical, unresolved issues that stand at the heart of the social experience of women in Israel in ways that mainstream Israeli feminist (and nonfeminist) discourse had never dared (or was able) to do. It has brought to the surface the unresolved question of the relations between Palestinian and Jewish women in Israel, thus opening the door for a closer scrutiny of the intersection of gender and nationality in identity formation. It has explored the deep tensions that structure the relationship of middle-class and intellectual women on the one hand and working-class and underprivileged women on the other. And it began an open, public discussion that examined the everyday and political implications of working within nonessentialist ethnic definitions of community.

Despite its limited range, in terms of its duration, the number of intellectuals/activists engaged in it, and the meager institutional resources available for its production and distribution, the impact of Mizrahi feminist intellectual thought on mainstream Israeli feminist discourse and praxis

has been considerable. The yearly feminist conferences have adopted a strict policy of equal representation for Palestinian, lesbian, Mizrahi, and Ashkenazi segments (known as the "quarter system") on its panels and workshops. There is now a general, often-voiced acknowledgment that feminist concerns must extend beyond the narrow focus on the issues of middle-class women, and several feminist outreach centers have reshaped their activist agenda to include the needs of Mizrahi and lower-class women.

But the multiple challenges posed by the alternative discourse produced by Mizrahi women intellectuals have had limited impact on academic teaching and research agenda in Israel. A major question posed in this article has been: Why is this the case? Why does the Israeli academic world remain a bastion of male-centered Eurocentrism? In attempting to address this question, I have written this article as an exploration of the politics of knowledge production in Israel. I reviewed the way that Israeli academe in general, and the more recent Israeli feminist discourse in particular, have talked about, processed, and produced Mizrahi women as a category. This review has shown that a blatant Orientalist phase of writing and research was replaced by a vacuum, by a lack of research into the life experiences of Mizrahi women. I would like to emphasize that the study of varied experiences of Mizrahi women was left out of academic literature and research at a critical moment in the historical process of Israeli knowledge production. Ashkenazi feminist scholars did not study Mizrahi women not merely because (as they claim) they liked to study themselves but, I suggest, because of their own particular location at the interlocking hierarchies of gender, national, and ethnic relations in Israel. As I have outlined above, the 1970s and 1980s have seen Israeli feminists struggling to define the very right for their gender-specific scholarship. They had to work hard to dispel the powerful Zionist myth that claimed that Jewish women are equal to men in Israel. By distancing themselves from the image they had constructed of the Mizrahi woman as tradition-bound, uneducated, and domestic they could fashion themselves as educated, modern, and thus worthy of equality with men.

Chandra Mohanty, citing Michelle Rosaldo (1980, 392), presents a similar process of binary construction of selves in the larger world scene where Western feminists cast third-world women as "ourselves undressed." "These distinctions," writes Mohanty, "are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent" (1995, 261). Israeli Ashkenazi liberal feminism has placed the Jewish Ashkenazi male at the center as a norm, an unquestioned standard to emulate. Both the liberal and the extremely marginal radical feminist discourses in Israel of the 1970s and 1980s have left unchallenged both the nationalist exclusion

built into this hegemonic model and, as we have seen, its Orientalist convictions.⁴⁰ The nascent Mizrahi feminist discourse I have outlined in this article is critical and pathbreaking, not only for its political effects (drawing attention to the marginalized position of Mizrahi women and experiences) but, most significantly, because it enables for the first time an alternative epistemic place that does not fall into the analytical traps standing at the center of mainstream Israeli feminism.

An important caveat should be made here before I turn to discuss the theoretical implications of Mizrahi intellectual discourse and to outline what I claim is its critical potential for reshaping Israeli scholarship. I wish to emphasize at this juncture that my reference to “mainstream Israeli feminism” does not imply that there is a monolithic, homogeneous body of academic and political discourse, a discourse unified by the ethnic and gender affiliation of its producers—Ashkenazi women. Differences in goals, interests, and analytical scope exist both among Ashkenazi feminist academics and, as I argued at length above, within the Mizrahi-centered discourse. Positing a singular Ashkenazi discourse will be as reductive as casting Mizrahi women in a stigmatized, ahistorical category. However, in the context of the overwhelming silence about Mizrahi women’s experiences, it is possible, I would like to argue, to point to a “coherence of effects” (Mohanty 1995, 259) within what I have called “mainstream Israeli feminism,” despite internal differences. Orientalists of the 1950s and 1960s, liberal feminists or “women-studies” (often explicitly nonfeminist) scholars of the 1970s and 1980s: these various academic writers have not challenged the modernist Zionist model that led them to codify Mizrahi and Palestinian women as Oriental and hence themselves as Western. The uncritical use of this binary model with its inherent ethnocentric and nation-

⁴⁰ In an almost surreal encounter, I found myself giving a lecture at an international conference on “Gendered Communities: The Challenge to Religion, Nation and Race” at Tel Aviv University on March 16, 1998, where I cited a known Israeli woman historian, Bili Melman. Melman, I noted, had written perceptively about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European women who had challenged the Orientalist views of Mediterranean women portrayed in the male literature of their time. In these European writings, I quoted Melman, “the concept ‘Oriental woman’ . . . ceased to be a homogenized concept, the essentialised characteristic of gender identified with an inferior culture. . . . Autonomy and subjugation were not grasped [in such women-centered literature] as unchanging life conditions but as historical, geographical and class conditions affected by economic and political changes as well as transformation in law and custom” (1995). I congratulated Melman’s sound analytical understanding and wished that such insights be brought into contemporary Israeli scholarship. Melman, who was one of the organizers of the conference, walked into my lecture late and missed my discussion of her work. When I completed my presentation, she voiced her objection to my thesis presented in this article.

alist contradictions has had inescapable analytical and political effects. It is to these effects that I wish to draw attention here. By positing its own brand of "Western" feminism as the only legitimate feminism, this feminist discourse has sought to establish its own activist agenda as "universal" by presenting other women as passive or as nonfeminist. We have seen how Mizrahi working-class women were told by Ashkenazi feminists to drop their efforts to examine their position within power relations articulated beyond ethnic and class lines and to focus instead on "how they are oppressed by Mizrahi men." These silencing tendencies of an alternative feminist agenda were based on an assumption of "sisterhood" that disregards class, ethnic, or national divisions among Israeli women. Positing such homogenized "sisterhood" as the only model for political action in the struggle against patriarchy has had oppressive, rather than liberating, effects on Mizrahi and Palestinian women.

Outlines of a future Mizrahi-centered research agenda

One of the goals of this article has been to establish, following Scott's dictum quoted at the beginning of this article, that "Mizrahi women" is a discursively constructed category within Israeli academic discourse. However, "Mizrahi women" as a discursive category constructed by Eurocentric academic sociological and scientific discourses (supported by economic, legal, and public discourses) must be distinguished from Mizrahi women as subjects of their own history. Mizrahi women have been powerless and marginalized in Israel because of concrete historical and political practices. By uncovering the specific material and ideological forces that have produced the powerless position of Mizrahi women in Israel, I wish not only to understand their (our) experiences better: I also hope to contribute to an effective organization that will change this situation.

Over the past three years,⁴¹ drawing mainly on postcolonial and radical feminist perspectives, I have attempted to set the stage for the kind of research agenda that is subject oriented (in the modernist sense) yet avoids an essentialist definition of differences and dichotomies along ethnic, class, and gender lines. The very skeletal overview of research themes and methodologies I will present below as the basis for a Mizrahi woman-centered research agenda derives from questions and debates in postcolonial and radical feminist discourses, but it is tempered by the Israeli realities and processes that I seek to analyze.

⁴¹ My work has been presented in various Israeli and non-Israeli settings. See Motzafi-Haller 1996, 1997a, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d.

A key factor of such a theoretical reformulation is that Mizrahi women must be posited as the starting point of research. Indeed, it may seem extremely provocative to insist that the kind of research I plan and hope to encourage is centered on Mizrahi women, while I claim all along that existing, conventional Israeli research has essentialized ethnic categories and orientalized Mizrahi Jews. Why, in other words, do I propose to begin with a group defined at the intersections of gender (women) and ethnicity (Mizrahi women) when these very categories must be problematized? This question has been at the center of postcolonial feminist theory and is clearly not unique to the Israeli setting. Spivak's famous resolution for this epistemological and political conundrum of positing "strategic essentialism"⁴² as a necessary tactic is a powerful, if not completely satisfying, answer.

Bhabha's notion of "the process of identification" is more helpful for my purposes here. "The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective," Bhabha tells us, "is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (1994, 2). There are several important lessons in Bhabha's thesis for a theorized work interpreting Mizrahi women experiences. The first lesson rests in the view that the articulation of social difference is made by the subaltern subjects themselves and from their particular perspective. It is important to distinguish between a pan-Mizrahi identity as an empowering basis for social action and theoretical reformulation on the one hand and Mizrahim as a collective category based on a definition imposed from without on the other hand.

Mizrahiyut as a collective ethnic identity has been developed, as many are fast to note, as a tool for the exclusion and discrimination of Mizrahim in Israel. Such construction of cultural diversity results in hegemonic attempts to dominate "in the name of a cultural supremacy" (Bhabha 1994, 34). Here cultural differences are postulated as primordial, given, and stable. In the Israeli context, such definition of *Mizrahiyut* gave rise to prejudice and stereotype that in turn have structured educational and other discriminatory policies. Following Bhabha, bell hooks, and Collins, I wish to draw attention here to the articulation of social difference *from the minority perspective* as a process of constructing *counterknowledge*. The articulation of cultural difference from Mizrahi women's perspective does not mirror hegemonic representations of *Mizrahiyut* but seeks to displace and resignify it. Instead of an essentialized identity, we find a process of identi-

⁴² See Spivak 1990. See also her interrogation of the critical question, "Can the subaltern speak?" Spivak 1985.

fiction. And herein lies the theoretical significance of Mizrahi intellectual discourse for the wider Israeli academic discourse.

Mizrahi feminist discourse presents a new epistemic starting point: it rejects a given, predefined community and proceeds instead to develop an ongoing negotiation of identities and crosscutting identifications. Such identifications emerge in particular moments of historical transformation; they are relational (i.e., construct themselves vis-à-vis other counterprocesses and collective identities) and are always shaped in contexts of power.

The everyday lives of Mizrahi women in contemporary Israel, I propose, present us with a particularly fertile ground for examining such complex, ongoing processes of creation, of the making of social identities at this particular juncture of Israeli history. By positioning Mizrahi women at the center and by focusing on these women's own articulation of concepts and experiences, we enable the ambiguous, multilayered reality of life in contemporary Israel to take center stage. There is a critical analytical bonus to such a reformulated research strategy. Once we focus our attention on the women and explore their ways of articulating categories and lending meaning to their experience, we open the space for the interrogation of hegemonically defined categories and concepts.

If one follows the path of my argument, one realizes that what I propose is a research strategy that posits a direct challenge to male Israeli Eurocentrism. In its most basic articulation, my idea is clearly to move beyond the call for more research about women of Mizrahi "origin." I do not want to see more research that documents the "customs" of Moroccan or Yemeni women, research that "fills in the gaps" in our ethnographic knowledge. Instead, I call for an analysis of the process of marking, of systematizing boundaries and categories, from the perspective and daily experience of Mizrahi women. Following such a research strategy means that the very process of boundary making is deconstructed. It is an analysis of the ongoing dynamics that create, fix, and reproduce social categories in Israel. From this perspective, the universal Israeli who stands at the center of mainstream Israeli academe is revealed as an Ashkenazi male and loses his transparent nature.

Furthermore, once we begin with a systematic deconstruction of the dominant images that construct 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 a system enables.

Finally, I argue that a research strategy that comes out of the double marginality of Mizrahi femininity extends the scope of social analysis of Israeli realities today because it links, by its very nature, the analysis of

the intersections of class, gender, power, labor experience, and family. The contradictory and fluid nature built into the everyday lives of these women stems from their structural position at crosscutting lines of ethnic, gender, and class relations. We will all benefit from an engaged analysis of concepts and theories that privileges Mizrahi women's subjective social experience.

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