CONTRADICTORY LOCATION:
ASSESSING THE POSITION OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN CITIZENS OF ISRAEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes issue with a certain inconsistency in the collective portrait of Palestinian women citizens of Israel, as it is depicted in the feminist literature which emphasizes, simultaneously, multiple forms of oppression and impressive resisting capacities, but does not give sufficient explanation of how these two seemingly contradictory aspects interrelate. I argue, using ethnographic data, that more attention than that paid so far should be given to structural tensions between the various regimes that compose the Israeli-Palestinian gender order, notably the family, the state, and the national/ethnic communities. While the shared patriarchal nature of these regimes produces powerful experiences of omnipresent and naturalized oppression, competition among them allows women some very important latitude. My emphasis on the contradictory location of Palestinian women in Israel is intended to place their agency in finer perspective, through elaborating the structural setting within which it is made possible.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade or so, Palestinian women in Israel have received increasing scholarly attention. Social research has addressed a variety

of their life concerns, notably their political and labor force participation, exposure to domestic violence, educational attainments and knowledge-making practices, reproductive strategies, images of modernity, and national and gender identities. Yet the representations that emerge from this body of literature seem somewhat conflicting. Alongside multiple forms of subordination—in the family, in the state, in their ethno-national community, and in the class system—the life situation of Palestinian women in Israel has improved dramatically over the past few decades in terms of education, reproductive and general health, individual rights, and standard of living. Concomitantly, significant numbers of individuals among them are often assertive, outgoing, sophisticated, and highly accomplished.

A quick classification of the existing literature on these women divides it into four major theoretical approaches. One line of analysis looks at issues concerning women through a modernistic lens that measures Israeli-Palestinian society in implicit or explicit comparison with a Western ideal that is allegedly less patriarchal and generally more advanced (e.g., Haj-Yahia 2003; Cohen and Savaya 2003; Batrice 2000). These studies characteristically draw on essentialistic, linear notions of modernity, tradition, and culture, and wholly omit questions of power. Other accounts, also modernistic, abandon the notion of a universalistic scale of women's liberation in favor of a cultural-relativistic approach (e.g., Ginat 1982; Levy-Weiner 2003; Gorkin 1996). Common to this category are narrative analyses of women's life stories which represent attempts to "listen to the voices" (Pessate-Schubert 2003) of women behind the veil of their culture. Authors in this category mostly endorse feminist discourses that hail the informal power and subjectivity of women in traditional settings. They too refrain from problematizing local or state systems. The third category is feminist studies, which differ from the preceding groups in that they link the situation of women to broader political issues. Reacting to long-standing notions of modernization in earlier discussions, these works often attempt, in their subtext, to expose the lie of Israeli democracy as liberating Palestinian women. They characteristically dwell on the double oppression of women under the state and the kinship systems (e.g., Abdo-Zubi 1987; Abu-Oksa Daoud 2002), the more radical ones addressing the sensitive issue of sexual and gender-based violence (Hasan 2002; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999a; 2004; Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Erez 2002; Adelman,

Erez, and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2003; Espanioly 1997). Last but not least are feminist studies on a range of topics, from political activism to the formation and negotiation of identity, which draw on a variety of post-modern perspectives. These works share the basic political reading of the previous group. However, their spotlight is directed at women's agency and creative forms of resistance (Ahmed-Kasem 2002; Kanaaneh 2002; Forte 2001; Yahya-Younis 2002; Abu Baker 2002; Erdreich and Rapoport 2002; Erdreich 2003; Herzog 2004).

Of the four categories, my theoretical engagement is with the last two, namely works that approach gender as embedded in multiple in-equalities and therefore correspond with the discourse of postcolonial feminism. Both groups of studies are convincing, I think, the first in documenting sexual, political, and symbolic forms of violence against women, the second in unfolding their impressive abilities to resist, maneuver, love, and live full and interesting lives. However, none offers a satisfactory explanation of how these two seemingly contradictory pictures interrelate. Admittedly, many critical scholars would tend to treat this not as a contradiction, but as complexity that emanates from the fact that Palestinian women in Israel are a diverse category, and from the ability of individual women to strategize within oppressive structures. Indeed, as recent ethnographic studies have shown, the range of behaviors that women consider possible and proper, and accordingly of those that society accepts in some but punishes in others, is impres-sively wide (Kanaaneh 2002; Erdreich 2003; Sa'ar 2000; 2004b; 2006b). Yet in and of themselves, neither social-demographic distinctions nor personality provide satisfactory explanations of the seemingly continu-ous polarity between oppression and empowerment that emerges in the scholarly literature.

Most existing critical feminist studies of this group, in their rejec-tion of the idea of Israel as a modern Western state that liberates Pales-tinian women, have not been able to accommodate the possibility that the system is not unilaterally oppressive. Consequently, these studies im-plicitly attribute disproportionate weight to agency. As a way out of this quandary I will argue that more attention than that paid so far should be given to structural tensions between the various regimes that preside over the lives of Palestinian women citizens of Israel. It is my conten-tion that these women navigate between multiple patriarchal regimes,

primarily the family, the state, and the national community, which relate to one another in a complex of complementarity and competition. These structural dynamics are pertinent to the evaluation of both the oppressive and the resistive aspects of the women's lives.

The first part of this paper provides some historical context. In particular I dwell on some of the frictions within the institution of the family and between it and other gender regimes that operate on the scene, and allude briefly to similar tensions on other levels of the Israeli-Palestinian gender order. This part concludes with a section on the concepts of "gender regime" and "gender order" which are at the basis of my analysis. In the second part, I present some ethnography, and then turn to the literature, in part three, to put the case at hand in a broader, regional perspective. The paper concludes with a summary of the main argument, namely that the location of Israeli-Palestinian women is structurally contradictory, and this basic factor needs to be taken into account in any evaluation of the complex picture of their suffering multiple oppressions while evincing impressive presence and achievements.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Palestinians who are Israeli citizens constitute a distinct sociopolitical category, notwithstanding their historical and ongoing political belonging to the larger Palestinian people.[1] The term Israeli Palestinians was chosen because it reflects the dual components of their inclusion and exclusion with respect to the state. While this term is admittedly offensive to common local sensitivities—at most levels of experience, organization, and representation, "Israeli" and "Palestinian" are antagonistic identities—it usefully communicates the oxymoronic aspect of the location of this group, which Dan Rabinowitz (2001) appropriately dubbed a trapped minority. They consider themselves part of the Palestinian nation and accordingly are seen by Israelis as enemies. At the same time, despite their active connections with Palestinians who live under occupation, they do not share their collective fate because their lives, work, consumption, and political interactions, and not least their entitlement to basic citizenship rights, give them very tangible advantages. Moreover, although the economic situation of Palestinian citizens is

generally poor compared with that of Jewish Israelis, they are markedly better off than most Palestinians in the Palestinian Authority (PA). Consequently, while formal belonging to the Palestinian people cultivates in Israeli Palestinians a proud-spiteful sense of Otherness vis-à-vis the state, the practical aspects of their daily lives distance them from Palestinians in the PA and occasionally even move them to regard the latter as inferior (Sa'ar 2004a; forthcoming). Note, with respect to the latter point, that ethnocentric attitudes toward Palestinians in the PA comprise practical rather than formal knowledge. They emerge in daily situations, for example, when people refer to cheaply purchased goods from the West Bank or Gaza as representing a lower level of cultural sophistication, or when they classify particular behaviors as cases of lesser modernity. Such attitudes do not annul feelings of identification and affiliation with Palestinians across the border. Rather, they comprise culturally intimate (Herzfeld 1997) instances of contradictions in self-identity.

Beyond the level of identity politics, structural contradictions pass like a golden thread through the major social, cultural, and political institutions of Israeli Palestinians. I will exemplify this briefly with the institution of the family. With some important distinctions among Muslims, Christians, Druzes, and Bedouins, and between urban and rural communities that I cannot go into here,[2] it is possible to generalize and say that the loss of agricultural lands and the consequent proletarianization of Palestinian men in the early decades of statehood (Rosenfeld 1978) transformed families, as Nahla Abdo-Zubi (1987) put it, from productive and reproductive units to almost exclusively reproductive units. Household economies and residential arrangements have become increasingly nuclearized. Rising levels of female education (Al-Haj 1995; Israel CBS 2002), decreasing fertility rates, and the ongoing preoccupation with notions of modernity have likewise contributed to more autonomy of females and young adult males. At the same time, patriarchal clans (*hamayil*, plural of *hamula*) have retained much of their power and political significance. During the almost 60 years of their living in the state of Israel, the hamula has remained the major political instrument at the communal and municipal levels (Rosenfeld and Al-Haj 1990; Al-Haj 1989; Yahya-Younis 2002). This is largely the result of active state attempts to use the hamula as a convenient apparatus to mobilize voters and to discourage political radicalization; but it also results from local

political culture. Other factors that boosted the power of patriarchal clans were the state's relinquishing of all matters of personal status to the different religious courts and the routine inclination of state agencies, notably the police, to support the normative authority of local notables over young men, and more particularly over women.

Between the increasingly nuclear domestic units and the persistent and strong clan system, active networks of extended families operate. In practical terms, most nuclear units are embedded, to different degrees, within patrilineal (and to a lesser extent also bilateral) kinship networks. This means different forms of cooperation and dependence, such as periodical cohabitation, sharing resources and services, and extensive socializing of the networks' members. It also readily entails the stretching of social control, especially over women. Therefore, as with Palestinians across the border, the family serves simultaneously as a source of oppression and support (Haj 1992; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999b).

On the level of individuals within families, increasing freedom of movement and autonomy for females are coterminous with persistent norms of preference for sons and male authority. These parallel developments have produced a range of localized prescriptions for gender roles and identities. For example, while marriage remains a cultural imperative for both genders—and for women in particular it is regarded as a rite of passage to adult femininity—marriage patterns are diverse. The average marriage age of women and men has risen over the past three decades by approximately one and a half years, with variations among religious groups and genders,[3] and female education has had a clear impact on their propensity to delay their marriage.[4] At the same time, significant numbers of females marry before they are 18, the normal age of high school graduation, and also before the age of 17, which is the legal marriage age in Israel.[5] Then again, increasing numbers of women of all denominations remain unmarried well into their forties.[6] Despite a general inclination to stigmatize and marginalize unmarried women, many individuals among them, especially those with high educational and occupational achievements, manage to win respect and authority in their families and communities (Sa'ar 2000; 2004b). Along similar lines, conceptions of motherhood and child-rearing have diversified. As in other Arab countries, motherhood remains highly revered (e.g., Zaatari 2006), but its content has been brought up to date. Among growing

numbers of families, especially newly formed nuclear units, the local version of patriarchal connectivity (Joseph 1999) has come to entail a preference for a smaller number of children and extensive spending as a form of investment in their future.

Contradictory developments in the institution of the family are closely connected with larger economic and political developments. For one, the state has played a major role in affecting the status of women. Besides the right to vote and to be elected, and their independent legal status, women's civil entitlements include free compulsory education, subsidized reproductive/health care, and welfare benefits such as the National Security minimum pension and child support in case of divorce, or in fact the very right to keep their children when they divorce. In practice, many of these and related entitlements have been limited due to poor healthcare, childcare, and educational facilities in the Arab localities (Swirski, Kanaaneh, and Avgar 1998; Khouri and Swirski 1998; Reiss 1991); because of discrimination in the distribution of National Security benefits (Lewin and Stier 2002); or, as mentioned, because of the lack of separation between state and religion. Additionally, the neo-liberal shift, which began in the 1980s and accelerated during the 1990s and 2000s, mostly aggravated discrimination against the Palestinian citizens of Israel, the women in particular. As many of the services that had been administered by the state were privatized or relegated to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), discrimination often received a legal stamp since NGOs are not officially committed to the principle of civil equality, and because the funds available to Israeli-Palestinian NGOs have been significantly lower than those available to their Jewish counterparts (Bank of Israel 2006). Additional factors that put opposing pressures on familial relations are the massive shift to a cash economy and, more recently, rapid immersion in the consumer culture. Men are expected to be the major if not the sole breadwinners and female employment rates remain very low (15 to 17 percent),[7] even though the relative earning power of Israeli-Palestinian men is low and they are particularly vulnerable to unemployment (Sa'di and Lewin-Epstein 2001). At the same time, as Rhoda Kanaaneh (2002) eloquently describes, spending has come to serve as a mark of cultural sophistication, with young people and particularly young women leading the way in the consumption craze.

Such new individualized forms of human capital within largely collectivist familial patterns are but one aspect of the broader dynamic in which opposing structural and historical forces set the stage for the operation of human agency. I end this brief overview with an outline of the vibrant field of Palestinian women's NGOs in order to highlight the collective aspect of women's agency, and therefore complement the personal aspect on which I then dwell in the ethnography. Since the early 1990s, and more intensely over the past decade, Palestinian society inside Israel has seen a rapid growth in the number and activities of NGOs,[8] among them some highly visible women's and feminist groups. *Jafra* and *al-Fanar*, two groups that were formed as early as 1990 and 1991, respectively, marked the start of a gathering stream of non-partisan feminist NGOs, which responded to the need of female activists to tackle women's oppression separately from national oppression, albeit still retaining a strong commitment to the Palestinian national struggle. Among the most prominent, self-defined feminist (*nisawiyya*) groups that are active today are Women Against Violence, *al-Siwar*, and *al-Badil*, which are dedicated to fighting gendered and sexual violence; the Haifa-based *Kayan* Feminist Organization; *al-Tufula* Pedagogical and Multipurpose Women's Center; *Ma'an*, the Forum of Bedouin Women; or more recently, *Aswat*, Palestinian Gay Women. In 2001, many of these groups forged a national framework called the Committee of Palestinian Arab Women (see, e.g., Abdo 2002; Abu-al-'Asal and Abu Baker 2006; WGSPWCI 2005). The discursive production of these circles has likewise benefited from a parallel rapid expansion in gender studies programs, where many of the activists have enrolled to produce master's and doctoral theses on issues concerning Palestinian women and then to form autonomous academic settings, such as the Gender Studies Project at the Haifa-based *Mada al-Carmel* Arab Center for Applied Social Research.[9] These forms of collective agency have been immensely influential in shaping public conceptions of women's position and of gender relations more generally, as is indicated, for example, by the public attack launched in March 2007 by members of the Knesset from the Islamic Movement against a conference on Arab lesbians organized by *Aswat*.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

I understand gender, the cultural construction of sexual differences, as

at once collective and personal. It is a phenomenon far broader than personal or sexual identity, even though the body, particularly the sexed body, constitutes a central arena for gender formation. Robert W. Connell (1996) has offered the term "gender regimes" to signify that power relations and hierarchies within all the major social institutions, particularly families, workplaces, state bureaucracies, and imagined collectivities, are invariably gendered. In turn, the "gender order" of a society refers to "the patterning of gender regimes, together with the gender patterning of culture and personal life" (161). The Israeli-Palestinian gender order is distinctly male-dominated, with consistent and cumulative power/prestige disparities between men and women, which are ingrained throughout the symbolic universe. However, because of the multilevel institutional composition of this gender order, women's position within it is not unilaterally subordinate, but contradictory.

The Israeli-Palestinian social field is informed by several meta-narratives, including modernity, national identity, cultural authenticity, Islamic morality, and liberal entitlement. Despite the various epistemological contradictions between these meta-narratives, their institutional forms are alike in that they are all distinctly patriarchal.[10] From the perspective of women's political and cultural subordination, the various gender regimes complement or reinforce one another, the most obvious example being the aforementioned state-supported dominance of patriarchal clans in communal life and municipal politics. As Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomovics (2001) write with respect to women in the Middle East generally, the "continuities among family, civil society, and state mean that [women] confront patriarchy in every sphere" (5). At the same time, it is significant that the different levels of power regimes are often at odds, which yields potentially contradictory results with respect to women. In its ongoing attempts to control and manipulate its Palestinian citizens, the Israeli state oppresses them but also bargains with them. Consequently, they do not entirely lack some measure of autonomy, despite their extensive marginalization. Then again, such autonomy does not automatically benefit women *as women*. In a manner characteristic of situations of ethnic or racial domination, gender rules are commonly used to promote racialization, while racist rules are used to increase sexism (Anthias 1998). In the Israeli case, the state's concessions to local Palestinian demands are usually packed in "cultural

relativism" terminology, which reinforces existing arrangements of male domination. Still, friction and contradictions within state policies, between state and communal institutions, and between competing collective narratives among the Palestinians themselves set the gender order in constant motion. As a result, new historical opportunities for women are created and the patriarchal bargains (Kandiyoti 1988) are reshaped, even though they do not disappear.

In sum, the simultaneous embedding of women in several gender regimes yields contradictory consequences. The overlap of male dominance across the various systems that inform their lives potentially intensifies their subjection to patriarchal control, yet the friction and competition between these mechanisms also create new historical opportunities. In their capacity as bearers simultaneously of tradition and modernity, women are significantly affected by such opportunities. Alongside daily experiences of patriarchal and racist control, Palestinian women in Israel also think, fantasize, and embody liberty, sophistication, and consumer comfort, capacities that, nevertheless, are grounded in the very same sociocultural context in which they are oppressed. In what follows, I present one ethnographic example of a woman who attempts to maneuver around formidable forces of obstruction and to seize opportunities that occur as a result of the contradictions among the different gender, class, and national regimes that dominate her life. Importantly, this story is not intended to be "representative." Other examples would elucidate different angles and different versions of the same principle. Rather, my intention in using a detailed and very localized story is to present some of the complexity of the barriers and opportunities before women, and of the multiple cultural competencies that they develop while handling them.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Samira, a 37-year-old Palestinian woman from Jaffa, came to my apartment one afternoon to talk about the coming elections to the Tel Aviv–Jaffa municipality.[11] She had just been given fourth place on the list of A., a Jewish celebrity who had decided to run for office, and she was very excited. Already in my apartment were Claude and Sigal, a young Jewish couple and newcomers to Jaffa. Claude was a film director inter-

ested in starting up a joint Jewish-Palestinian video project, and he had come to see if I could put him in touch with local people. He too was in an enthusiastic mood: "Every corner here is asking to be filmed." As he related some misunderstandings that he had had with local Palestinians he had approached for his project, Claude declared, "I'm not political. This probably sounds funny since everything here is so political." When Samira entered, I introduced them and they shook hands. She then sat down facing me, half turning her back to Sigal and Claude, and began speaking rapidly, telling me where she had been. Throughout her lengthy monologue she casually dropped names of local politicians, usually their first names only. That and her intimate tone signaled that she was talking about matters familiar to the two of us, which put my other guests in the position of passive listeners. Nevertheless, Claude and Sigal eagerly followed Samira's conversation, and Sigal occasionally asked clarifying questions. As Samira responded to these questions, she mentioned, in passing, her studies and her involvement in local activism, again using code names such as "the nest program" or "the physical committee" without bothering to spell out their meaning.

While Samira did not address Sigal and Claude directly, she by no means ignored them. As I was already familiar with Samira, as well as with the dynamics of Jewish-Arab encounters, I could tell that she held them in thrall. Here was an Arab woman, poised and dressed up in what would pass as exquisite Jewish-Israeli fashion, with a long orange cotton skirt, a matching semi-transparent sleeveless flowery top, and flat sandals. Her Hebrew was flawless and up-to-date, and her style of speech reflexive and nuanced. For example, when she declared, "All I care about is to give to the community... through volunteer work," she added, "Mind you, I say volunteer *work*, because this is doing too." Remembering how I myself had felt when I first got to know Samira several months earlier, I could see that Sigal and Claude were becoming mesmerized with her. I also knew that she was well aware of this. Then, some twenty minutes into her light, charming monologue, she turned to Claude and Sigal, literally swiveling her body and face from me to them, and said, "May I ask what you are doing in Jaffa? Do you rent here or are you among those who have come to buy and throw us out?" Sigal and Claude froze. Again Samira took them by surprise, but this time it was a distressing surprise. The modern, aesthetic, seemingly "Judaized" Arab

woman, who had attracted and fascinated them, had turned political and offensive. A dialogue started between Samira and Sigal, in which the former accused and the latter responded in a defensive tone. Samira set forth the difficult housing situation in Jaffa and spoke of the discriminatory development policies. She talked about her involvement in a local struggle for affordable housing for Arabs, and said that it would take thousands of new apartments to accommodate local families for the near future alone, not to mention the next generation. Sigal was visibly upset by Samira's speech.

> Sigal: "Why do you talk like that? Do you want to create tension here between Jews and Arabs?"

> Samira: "It's like the new immigration [of Jews from the former Soviet Union]. There are 200,000 unemployed people in this country, so why bring in more people? Would I go and have another baby if I were living in crowded conditions? It's the same thing."

> Sigal: "But the new immigrants don't just take other people's jobs. They also create new jobs. It's a new potential that's being brought in...."

> Samira: "The rich Jews come here [to Jaffa] but do not contribute to the community. They send their kids to school in Tel Aviv. What input do they have for me?"

> Sigal: "And what about the rich Arabs in Jaffa, who make a lot of money in trade and tourism? What do they give back to the community?"

> Samira: "I have no problem with them, because they are from here. They are part of the community... and by the way, when I talk about old-timers in Jaffa I mean Jews, Muslims, and Christians, because that's how we live here, together."

Toward the end of this charged discussion Sigal expressed in words what had been obvious in her body language. She and Claude believed that their coming to live in Jaffa was indeed a form of social activism. They had previously lived in Tel Aviv and had decided to come to Jaffa in order to make contacts with Arabs rather than continue living in protected isolation. Sigal could not understand why they, of all people, were being attacked. To which Samira answered,

I am not attacking you personally. I have nothing against individual people. For all I know you may be wonderful people, and you will always remain the nice people I met at Amalia's. My problem is with the policy. Was I too brusque? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just that the policy is very discriminatory.

Before they parted, Sigal asked for Samira's phone number and it was given to her with a warm invitation to "call me anytime, I'll give you a tour and we'll talk some more." Then Sigal and Claude left, and Samira stayed a while longer to talk about her political project. She was adamant about getting a head start, and the local elections seemed like a good opportunity. She had never considered trying the Arab list, which had one seat on the city council, held in rotation by a Muslim and a Christian representative. She was nowhere near the circle of influential people in Jaffa, and anyway too many men were competing for that single seat to make room for a woman. So she had started by approaching B., the leading candidate, who afterwards was indeed elected mayor of Tel Aviv–Jaffa, and then another Jewish politician, C., from a smaller but not insignificant party. A third contender she decided to pass up, "because he already has D. [an Arab man from Jaffa]." Lastly, "I never considered E., because he's Likud [right-wing party]." After the first two candidates declined to have her on their list, she learned about A. and promptly contacted his people to market herself as an attractive Arab-woman candidate. The entire process was overwhelming. "When I met with B. I felt small and pathetic. With C., I already spoke differently. I was relaxed and confident. I told her that she could earn me.... I clearly charmed her." And later, "A. is completely new to me. The truth is that I never heard of him until last week, but I thought it'd be worth trying, and it was!"

Samira never did get a seat on the city council, since A.'s list only garnered enough votes to secure a seat for him. The opportunity for a political career did not materialize at that point, and she resumed her routine of working as a part-time secretary, attending evening classes, and mothering her three young children. Samira's story is one of many possible examples, each specific and somewhat unique, that may throw light on some of the ways in which Palestinian women in Israel make sense of and manage their situation. With her husband's moderate salary

being the family's major source of income, running a household was a permanent struggle for her. She would carefully calculate her domestic consumption, wait until the market's closing hours to shop for fresh fruits at lower prices, and buy mostly wholesale. To manage expenses such as bills or the children's school fees, she would juggle sums of money obtained as loans from friends and relatives, buying time and constantly rearranging priorities. Having gotten deeply in debt due to a failed business enterprise, she was also bound, by court order, to repay the debt in set monthly installments, which entailed a long-term bond, high interest, and restrictions on her bank account.

In her daily routine, much of Samira's time and energy are spent on domestic affairs such as household chores, caretaking, or socializing with her relatives and her in-laws, all of whom live nearby. Her acute economic hardship extenuates the confining character of this domesticity and frequently turns it into a heavy burden, which is again fairly common for Palestinian women, urban or rural. Yet Samira is hardly a confined woman. She works outside the home, involves herself in community activism, and has undertaken diverse types of study, from self-help workshops to vocational training to working toward a Bachelor's degree at the Open University. In the process, she networks extensively outside of her ethnic and local community. Notably, despite her own socio-economic background, many of her Jewish and foreign connections are with highly educated, professional, or well-to-do individuals. On various occasions, for example, Samira mentioned to me "wonderful women" whom she got to know, and how they befriended her. One, she said, had given her a private scholarship to help pay for her university studies. Another had helped her write her CV, and so on. Similarly, her attempt to get elected to the city council was one of several efforts that she made throughout our year-and-a-half acquaintance to break the cycle of marginalization in which she felt trapped. While a seat on the city council was not a paying job, it carried public visibility and generated connections, which Samira felt her talents and charisma deserved, and could potentially start her on a new road.

Palestinians mingling with Jews in Israel is not at all rare, and on the individual level it may well yield tangible benefits. For aspiring individual Palestinian men and women, networking with Israeli Jews is indispensable to break out of the ethnic job market. However, socializing

is potentially strewn with obstacles and therefore demands certain skills. Highly proficient in the nuances of the Israeli-Jewish mentality, many Palestinian citizens sophisticatedly ration their "otherness" so as to cater to Jews' liberal self-image without stirring their collective anxieties. In the encounter between Samira, myself, and Claude and Sigal, this underlying motif was brought out through the interplay between gender, national, and class images. Samira's modern appearance was potentially surprising for her Jewish interlocutors because it refuted the common image of Arab women as "traditional." Her style of speech was not only "Israeli," but of a particular class and status group, that of educated, urban, white-collar people.

In and of itself, of course, there is nothing surprising in the modernity of Israeli Palestinians, considering the "relentlessly dialectical" (Foster 2002) character of global encounters with Western modernity, and the important role of local histories in the debates on modernity throughout the Middle East (Kandiyoti 1998). In Israel, modernity has been a prominent discursive preoccupation among both Jews and Palestinians. As Rhoda Kanaaneh (2002) demonstrates for Palestinians, and Aziza Khazzoom (2003) does for Jews, arraying groups up the rungs of an imaginary ladder of modernity has served as a popular form of ethnocentrism. Recall, for example, Samira's metaphor of irrational family planning, when she claimed that the massive wave of Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union was exacerbating unemployment. Implicitly condemning the state's policy of Judaization, she refrained from direct reference to Palestinian exclusion, and framed the policy instead as sentimental and irrational. This was a clever reversal of a central theme in the state's own claims to modernize Palestinian citizens.

A useful concept to examine what made Samira, in that particular situation, a friendly or non-threatening Other is the notion of the stranger, as elaborated by Ulrich Beck (1996). The stranger, writes Beck, "breaks open from inside the established categories and stereotypes of the local world (the world of locals)" (381). To earlier versions of this old concept, which emphasized distinction, Beck adds the counter-quality of sameness. He dwells on the undeniable sense of primary belonging that people develop toward the culture in which they have been raised, but to which they have nevertheless remained official outsiders, and on the strong irritation that this situation instigates in both the "hosts"

and the "strangers." Samira's shift from cultural familiarity to political offense was, in a sense, a dramatic embodiment of the qualities of a stranger. Usually it is the Palestinians who, being a minority, have to stomach the unease that ensues when workmates, fellow students, or neighbors express collective loyalties that implicate them as enemies. In mixed company they tend to keep quiet about any sentiments that may upset the Jews, while the latter tend to feel at liberty to speak their minds. The space where Palestinians increasingly do allow themselves to openly express national positions is explicitly political contexts, such as organized politics or overt political discussions, where a blunt and aggressive style is the cultural bon ton (Sa'ar 2006a). In this respect, Samira's proud Palestinian talk, while oppositional in content, could also be read as another token of her familiarity with and even integration into the majority culture. It was, in that sense, a form of "integrative provocation," which seemed particularly apt for the political campaign she was getting into; she would be the candidate who would bring some Arab votes to the typical Jewish Tel Aviv celebrity. Her discourse was less radical than it might have seemed. It was entirely focused on municipal issues of housing and urban development, and therefore not directly threatening to liberal Tel Aviv Jews whose interests lay elsewhere. It was also very much controlled. Indeed, Samira's apologies toward the end encouraged Sigal to ask if they could stay in touch with her, suggesting that what had started off as an upsetting provocation might well have subsequently inspired a sense of more authentic familiarity.

One last theme from Samira's story, which reflects on Israeli-Palestinian women more generally, is her navigation between competing patriarchies. The seemingly opportunistic character of her attempt to break into Jewish political circles echoes a vivid realization that she didn't stand a chance in her local arena. Her effort to bypass one ethnonational patriarchy in order to plunge into the other was, as she put it, worth trying. After all, Jewish-Israeli politics claims to be liberal and democratic. Because of that, and despite gross gender discrimination there too, individual femininity *could* be converted into political capital, if played out correctly in the right context. In Samira's example, gender (an Arab woman embodying modernity, liberalism, and democratic freedom) was used to mitigate the explosive potential of national identity. Yet the latter was not toned down entirely, since Samira did after

all attempt to offer a certain uniqueness in her competition with Jewish women on their home turf. Her eventual failure, like the failures of more experienced and better connected Palestinian women to break into local and national politics, is the corollary of blocked political paths, where these women seem to be last in line. Although the system works against them, the possibility of joining it is not entirely theoretical, since particular conjunctures may, in rare cases, facilitate the political participation of individual Palestinian women. The attempt to make a political career is therefore one of several possible ways to strike a liberal bargain and cash in on the liberal dividend. As I explain elsewhere (Sa'ar 2005), the liberal bargain is a process, mostly mental, that members of marginalized groups undergo as they strategize to realize whatever limited benefits they can extract from their disadvantaged position in the liberal order.

The story of Samira conveys the immersion of Palestinian women citizens of Israel in the concentric circles of power that surround their community. At the same time, it also conveys the possibility of their agency. To paraphrase what bell hooks (1992) says about black women in the United States, even under conditions of massive exclusion and disregard, these women still have their gaze. This gaze, which carries and creates their interpretations of reality, has simultaneous qualities of cooptation and subversion. Samira once told me, "The other morning my son said to me, 'Mom, you're looking great!' I said, 'Thank you *habibi* [darling], and so are you. We make the way we feel and look'." At that time she was participating in co-counseling workshops in a nearby Jewish city, and the style and content of the exchange between her and her son were clearly derived from what she had learned in co-counseling. They were not common in her local ethnic environment, although her exposure to them was by no means rare or unique. In a sense, she was using the tools and the concepts of the dominant culture. But then, these were globally circulating tools and concepts, and therefore not in any sense authentic to the dominant (Jewish-Israeli) culture. As we have seen, these modes of thinking and communication techniques partly marked Samira and other Palestinian women as urbane, which in turn earned them points in the never-ending competition over modernity. However, Samira's implementation of the co-counseling technique had another important value. It empowered her, her son, and plausibly also

others in her surroundings. Her potentially oppositional subjectivity, in other words, evolved hand in hand with her internalizing the tropes and modes of the thinking of the dominant culture.

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The ethnographic case presented here was meant to give a vivid and nuanced look into women's maneuverings and ingenuity within a gender order that produces multiple oppressions but, being full of contradictions, also opens small but meaningful windows for change and empowerment. Trying to put this situation in context, one asks how much of this is distinctive of Israeli Palestinians. In the literature on women in Middle Eastern and Islamic cultures, frictions and contradictions are a leading theme. Scholars have dwelt on the constant tension between women's power and disempowerment (Nelson 1974; Joseph and Slyomovics 2001; Saʿar 2006b), or between defiance and restraint (e.g., Sabbagh 1996; Abu-Lughod 1990). Several edited collections (e.g., Kandiyoti 1991; Joseph 1999; Joseph and Slyomovics 2001) have been dedicated to the conflicting pressures exerted on women by state, kinship, and ethnic systems, and the ensuing interplay of limitations and possibilities. For example, Suad Joseph (1991), comparing the legal status of women in Iraq and Lebanon, writes that in both cases the process of modern state formation entailed institutional reconstructions and the reconstitution of local culture:

> The Iraqi elite used the state as an agent of legal reform, attempting to change family structure and the position of women. The Lebanese elite shied away from legal reform and affirmed the authority of religious institutions over women and the family. The centralizing state was the critical arena of action in Iraq; the private sector was key in the minimalist Lebanese state (177).

More recently such analyses have focused increasingly on the influence of world capitalism and global neo-liberal schemes (Doumato and Posusney 2003; Hatem 2005; Hale 2005).

Religion has played a major though by no means unique role in the regional gender order. Many Middle Eastern states rest their claim to legitimacy on the endorsement of Islam, whether incorporating po-

litical Islam into the very apparatus of the state or struggling to keep it at bay while adhering to a general religious conservatism. In Israel, the centrality of Judaism in Zionism has meant, ipso facto, the exclusion of non-Jews from full membership in the nation and the state, at the same time as the liberal component has granted them important civil rights. Some Middle Eastern states went through socialist phases during which religious codes were replaced by secular constitutional codes that imposed radical infringements on traditional gender and class prerogatives. Whatever the specific configuration, women's rights and opportunities, as well as their expectations, have been shaped under modi vivendi between groups and ideologies that compete but also share notions of naturalized male domination.

One aspect that renders Israeli Palestinians distinctive is their status as a national minority within an ethnic democracy (Smooha 2002). Critical scholars of Israel (Shafir and Peled 1998; 2002) have identified several unequal tracks of citizenship. The liberal idea of citizenship functions to separate citizen Jews and Palestinians from non-citizen Palestinians in the Palestinian Authority and abroad. The ethno-national discourse of inclusion and exclusion is then invoked to discriminate between Jewish and Palestinian citizens within the sovereign state of Israel. Lastly, the republican discourse is used to legitimize different positions occupied by the major Jewish groups, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, men and women, with the innermost group enjoying not only liberal and ethno-nationalist rights, but also the privileges of republican citizenship: participation in the definition of the common good of society. Within these initial classifications, feminist scholars (e.g., Berkovitch 1997; Fogiel-Bijaoui 1997; 1998; Sasson-Levy 2003) have further elaborated the multiple articulations of gender, class, and ethnic hierarchies. Hence, according to Silvie Fogiel-Bijaoui (1998), the neo-liberal shift from welfare to charity exacerbated the conditional citizenship of the poor, whose needs are discussed in terms of ethnic retardation or personal distress, instead of being regarded as civil rights. Palestinian women, who are over-represented in this group, are therefore particularly prone to being framed as "problematic subjects."

With all its partiality, the minimal tier of liberal citizenship still entails important human and civil rights, and indeed Palestinian women in Israel have made several attempts to mobilize the state for

their gender interests. Yet the intertwining of republican exclusion and liberal inclusion has made such projects particularly sensitive. Unlike Pakistani women, for instance, whose negotiations with the state, according to Ayesha Jalal (1991), have rested on a shared interest in preserving Islamic credentials, Israeli-Palestinian women's demand that the state grant them rights and protection often plays into the latter's modernizing project, which has been used to patronize and control the Palestinian citizens. The dilemma is most acute, for example, in cases of women seeking police protection from male domestic violence. Not only is the very airing of such violence considered taboo and bears great potential of further implicating the victims, going to the police involves a set of additional risks. Palestinians in Israel often regard the police as the quintessential arm of state oppression. Conversely, Palestinian women who dare to go to the police are most likely to be treated with a combination of racism and sexism (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2004). Nevertheless, Israeli-Palestinian women have struggled, often in coalitions with Jewish-Israeli women's NGOs, for the implementation of a range of legal rights and protections.

In sum, within national and international political economies that work to Palestinian disadvantage, the gender order magnifies the vulnerability of Palestinian women in Israel in several interconnected ways. First, they are removed from positions of formal power, which hinders their economic, political, and personal opportunities. Second, the prevailing tendency is to treat women as guardians and walking embodiments of collective identities and moralities (Peteet 1993; Sa'ar 2006b), a role that imposes weighty encumbrances but also proffers important gratifications. Third, all the different power regimes are patriarchal. Male dominance counterbalances the competition among local ethnic/religious collectivities, and between the national collectivity and the state. It provides a shared language, or a meta-symbolic scheme, which connects these systems and offers them means for temporary collaborations.

Against such amplifying effects, structural tensions and contradictory developments offer women potential relief and opportunities for action. Earlier, with regard to the institution of the family, I mentioned parallel-but-opposite orientations of fortified patriarchal clans and the increasing autonomy of nuclear households and individuals. Globaliza-

tion, with the plenitude of discourses, images, products, information, and connections that it facilitates, cultivates in Palestinian citizens, as in Jewish Israelis, opposed ideologies of nationalistic fundamentalism and consumer-oriented secularism (Ram 2005). On the level of the state, the shift from a centralized state-led welfare system to a privatized/market model, which has characterized the region as a whole (Hatem 2005), has largely intensified the marginalization of Palestinian women, because of their initially vulnerable class and civic positioning. Decentralization, which notably has not included state policing of Palestinian citizens, entailed a growing retreat from civil services which were readily replaced by kin, ethnic, and religious networks. At the same time, the intensification of the discourse on women's rights, the expansion in women's NGOs, the immersion of the Palestinians in consumer culture, and an increasing media demand for "surprisingly modern" Arab women have produced new types of dividends to be sought. Thus, although life-changing opportunities come about only for the few, usually women from particular class or ethno-religious backgrounds, increasing numbers of individual women of *all* subgroups have enjoyed expanding room for creative maneuvering and negotiation, as recent ethnographies vividly document (Sa'ar 2001; 2004b; 2006b; Kanaaneh 2002; Forte 2001; Erdreich 2003; Abu-Rabia-Queder n.d.).

CONCLUSION

The Palestinian women citizens of Israel are simultaneously subjected to several gender regimes, all of which are strongly patriarchal, albeit in different ways. Their belonging to a national (ethnic, religious) minority amplifies their gender disempowerment, and vice versa. Yet this amplification is not akin to the simple accumulation of oppressions; they are not, as it were, discriminated against "twice." Rather, as was presented at the beginning of this paper, the understanding that the ethno-national order is gendered in its very constitution means that the national or class discrimination that women encounter echoes their most intimate and deep-rooted experiences as women. Potentially, such intensified marginalization yields very powerful experiences of omnipresent and naturalized oppression. The gendered character of the various power regimes acting in the scene assimilates them and facilitates their partial

collaboration. An obvious example is the case of the police returning to the custody of their future killers women who have fled from the homes of their relatives, allegedly out of respect for local culture (Kandalaft and Rohana 1997; Hasan 2002). At the same time, the ethno-national component sets the power regimes against one another, and this allows women some very important latitude. Beside the explicit, even if paternalistic, forms of protection and advancement that one system or another offers women in order to undermine its opponents, the tensions between the different regimes produce permanent fractures in the broader gender order. This in turn provides fertile ground for women's creative maneuvering, and facilitates their personal and collective agency.

A major structural contradiction is found in the family, where nuclearization and new forms of individualized capital operate within strong descent groups, rendering conflicting effects on gender and generational relations. Another is between the ethnocratic position of the state, which exercises collective exclusion of its Palestinian citizens, and its nominal liberal commitment to respect their individual "human rights," which engenders important liberal bargains within a largely blocked sociopolitical sphere (Sa'ar 2005). A third important friction emanates from the simultaneous hegemonic hold of religious/cultural conservatism and secular modernity over wide subgroups of Palestinian and Jewish Israelis alike. These again facilitate public embodiments of diverse cultural personas. As we have seen in the ethnography and in the overview of the historical context, Palestinian women inside Israel respond to this complex of barriers and opportunities with impressive creativity. Their efforts, while not always successful, culminate in a vital cultural scene, abundant in diverse role models, wherein women can expand the realm of conceivable possibilities.

As I observed in the Introduction, the feminist literature on Palestinian women in Israel renders a somewhat inconsistent account, enumerating the various sources of their oppression yet at the same time celebrating their agency, wit, and sophistication. My attempt in this paper has been to provide the missing link, in the form of a structural analysis of the women's location. In my understanding it is the structurally contradictory location of these women that fuels the dialectics of power and disempowerment so salient in their collective story. The

relationships of family, ethnic communities, national community, and state are characterized by admixtures of similarities and antinomies. The similarities are the gendered and ethnic principles that underlie the most basic logic operating on the scene. The antinomies define distinct actors and interests. Feminist literature, with its double agenda to put forward women's predicament and debunk their stereotype as passive victims, has tended to emphasize the robust injustices and, by implication, to credit the achievements of women within such a context entirely to their agency. My emphasis on frictions and contradictions between and within the different power regimes is intended to put agency in finer perspective, through elaborating the structural component of the equation. As Saba Mahmood (2005) reminds us, following Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, power implies a set of relations that at once dominate the subject and form the conditions of her possibility. Similarly, my focus on structural contradictions derives from the understanding that the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent.

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NOTES

1. The following overview does not include Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, who are entitled to certain welfare benefits but are not Israeli citizens.

2. For a more detailed account, see Saʿar 2007.

3. Between the years 1970 and 2000, the average marriage age of Muslim women rose by 1.3 years, and that of Muslim men by 1.2 years. Among Christians, women's average marriage age rose by 1.5 years and that of men rose by less than one year. Among Druzes the change was greater: women's average marriage age rose by 1.6 years, while that of men rose by 2.6 years (Israel CBS 2006, table 3.5).

4. For example, only 15 percent of Muslim women with more than 12 years of schooling married younger than 20, compared with 54 percent of women without

formal schooling (Israel CBS 2002).

5. Because underage marriages are illegal, it is difficult to obtain orderly statistics about them. Still, my ethnographic data tend to confirm this impression, as local people, especially educated ones, strongly denounce the persistence of what they call "premature marriages" (*il-zawwaj il-mubakker*) (Saʿar 2000).

6. In 1998, 10 percent of Druze and Muslim women aged 40–44 had never married, compared with only 3 percent of the men in these two groups. In 1970, only 4 percent of Druze and Muslim women in that age group had never married (Israel CBS 2002).

7. Note that while the employment rates of Israeli-Palestinian women resemble the average in other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Moghadam 2005), they differ radically from the participation of Israeli-Jewish women in the paid work force, which is estimated as 53 percent (Israel CBS 2002; Kraus 2002).

8. For details, see *Ittijah*, the Union of Arab Community Based Organisations, http://www.ittijah.org/.

9. http://www.mada-research.org/programs/women.shtml.

10. On the patriarchal character of modern liberal regimes see, for example, Barriteau 1998. For the Israeli/Palestinian case, see Berkovitch 1997 and Klein 1997.

11. This paper is based on anthropological fieldwork that I carried out in Jaffa between 1997 and 1999. The basic methodology employed was participant observation, including informal visits in people's homes, volunteering at local NGOs, and attending a diverse range of social, religious, and political community events. I also collected life histories and conducted formal interviews with several dozen individuals, mostly women, Muslims and Christians, of various age groups.

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