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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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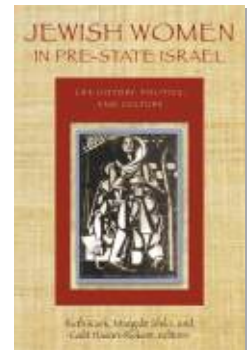
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Mizrahi Women

Identity and Herstory

Introduction

The wordplay in English involving “history” and “herstory” illustrates the claim that history was written by men about men, and that the role of women is missing. The feminist revolution has penetrated into the ivory towers and begun to trickle into fields of research and to illuminate the absence and marginality of women in history. Gender research in political thought revealed the apparatuses for the separation and exclusion of women. This claim has been investigated by female researchers in various disciplines. Susan Okin found that the inclusive term “man” is not so abstract when it comes to the gender division of labor and to its organization according to spheres.¹ In statements about responsibility and the value of the spheres — the private and the public — thinkers such as Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Hegel perceive women in instrumental terms in the private sphere, which is considered secondary to the public. When speaking about political concepts such as freedom, control, or justice, they apply them to the concept “man” that is held as an abstract, as it were, and by allusion the discussion applies also to women and includes them, too. In a discussion about the responsibility for the continuation of the human genus, on responsibility for the home and family and childrearing, these philosophers make a clear distinction and point out that this is the role of women. Okin summarizes her analysis with the conclusion that the Western thinkers’ approach can be summed up by the gender distinction according to which they perceive women in a instrumental manner and ask “What is a woman *for*?” while their perception of men is one of essence, that is, “What is a man *like*?”² Feminist historical re-

search according to this line of argument from now on must concentrate on the history of women in order to close many gaps.

A large question looms up in this regard on how to investigate this field. If the public sphere and the rules of the game within it were determined by men, and if the private sphere has been perceived as so inferior to the point of its not being mentioned, what then are the sources from which one can learn about it? Feminist scholars have demonstrated the importance of multiple points of view in philosophical and historical research, including the problematics of the concept “objectiveness.”³ Following Foucault, they pointed out the need to dismantle the connection between Knowledge with a capital “K” and power during the process of the creation of knowledge — a dismantling that leads to there being no single ultimate, objective, true knowledge, but rather multiple viewpoints. This calls for expanding the gamut of knowledge so that place will be given to every point of view.⁴ This line of thought befits other weak groups, too, which until recently also had been excluded and marginalized. The influence of the colonialist government, for example, constituted a broad base for the study of the politics of identities.⁵ The combination of political processes with aims of creating knowledge from multiple different viewpoints undermines the patriarchal monopoly on knowledge inherently challenging knowledge. It carries tensions and dangers deriving from the threat directed towards those who hold hegemony over current knowledge. Moreover, it necessitates the development of new methodologies to reach sources of knowledge that are not attested through the traditionally accepted documentation.

In the Western world, one already may find historical studies that construct “herstory,” that is, including the role of women in the stories of the national ethos. Their methodological importance is that beyond the expansion of knowledge as to women’s role in the national story of building the nation, they point out the difficulty in illuminating women’s story when they are not included in the officially documented ethos in the national pantheon. The situation is even more problematic and complicated when dealing with socially and culturally heterogeneous societies. In cases such as these, where there is an attempt at documenting the role of women in a national, historical endeavor, they are perceived as a homogeneous mass in terms of gender, which hides and represses their links to various groups that are at time in conflict.

This is the situation in relation to Israel and the history of women in Israel. “Herstory,” when speaking of Israel, is a story that takes place in a society composed of groups divided by ethnic, national, economic, and religious

schisms. The question that must be asked is whether it is possible to learn about the women in Israel even when dealing with a segment of one of society's groups.

In this article, I delineate the research framework needed for the purpose of the story of one of the significant but excluded groups in Israeli society — Jewish women from Arab and Muslim countries of origin. Women who belong to this ethnic group often are referred to as Mizrahim (in Hebrew the meaning is Orientals and literally Easterners). Since this group has not been studied from a political perspective and existing knowledge about it is limited to anthropological-folkloric research, all other issues — their identity as Mizrahi persons, their knowledge, their political point of view, and many others — are virgin territory. In the Israeli context, these questions take on a concrete aspect that touches upon their contribution to the national enterprise, their representation in the public arena, their location on the economic scale, and other facets. My objective, therefore, is to indicate the little that has been done as I sketch a framework in which research into Mizrahi women in Israel will develop. At the focal point of the description will stand the identity of the Mizrahi women, the nature of the connection between the experiences that establish this identity and their history and socio-political status in Israel. Owing to their absence in the historical narrative of Israeli society and their absence in herstory, this paper constitutes a proposal for research and for a political agenda whose focus is on Mizrahi women.

The vacuum that exists regarding the formation of Mizrahi women's identity is particularly prominent when viewed against the development of the process of the empowerment of women in Israel. Those who considered themselves as representatives of all Israeli women actually acted on behalf of a partial and specific agenda. Yet, that agenda does not cover all groups of Israeli women, which include ultra-Orthodox women, women with right-wing views, Ethiopians, Russians, and so on.⁶ In the historical narrative of Israeli society, their chapter is absent — they simply do not exist. In 1999, following the feminist annual conference traditionally celebrated in Givat Haviva, a first initiative was taken and the organization Ahoti, For Mizrahi Women was founded by Netta Amar and myself. In the case of the Mizrahi women, such an organization was missing twice, once as women in the way that the story of the entire body of women in Israel is lacking from the patriarchal and historical canon and once as Mizrahi women, similar to the story of Mizrahi Jews in Israel. Also lacking is the story of the community of immigrants from Asia and Africa.⁷ In the first study, made twenty years ago, on the topic of women who had come from Arab and Muslim countries dur-

ing the mass immigration of the 1950s, I found that Mizrahi women constitute the “invisible” quarter of the Jewish population of Israel. Even when concentrating on Jews who came from Arab and Muslim countries, the Mizrahi women are swallowed up and invisible.

The debate taking place in Israel on the issue of the ethnic rift and the fact that statistically defining Mizrahim and locating this social category is becoming increasingly problematic (in light of intermarriage, a policy of denial, and a tendency toward repression on the part of many Mizrahim as well). The creation of a political and research space in which Mizrahi women will be discussed as a category becomes difficult, if not even prevented. In this framework, I will concentrate on delineating the difficulty in the absence of Mizrahi women from the historical narrative. In the course of my analysis, I shall illustrate directions for research and indicate the recommendations called for in the study of the processes of the construction of the identity of Mizrahi women.

The State of Research and the Feminist Alternative

When I began to deal with the study of the history of Mizrahi women in the mass immigration, I found that for three generations Mizrahi women have constituted a decided majority at the bottom of the Israeli social scale, alongside Palestinian women. I also learned that no works have been devoted to the history of Mizrahi women in Israel.⁸ The little that has been done includes studies that have dealt with dance among the women from Kurdistan, the singing of Yemenite women, embroidery and weaving in the Tunisian villages, and women’s sayings from North Africa (Harvey Goldberg, Alex Marx, Esther Sheli Newman, Tsvia Tobi, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Dov Noy, S. Deshen, A. Weingrod, Ben Refael, Susan Sered, Rachel Wasserfal, Tamar Alexander). In light of this difficulty, I started from scratch, eking out from primary data a profile of Mizrahi women in Israel using sources that referred to Mizrahim in general. Around that time, the first articles appeared on Mizrahi women: Ella Shohat, as part of her analysis of Israeli cinema, treated the image of Mizrahi women, and Vicki Shiran, as well as Debby Bernstein, wrote about Mizrahi women in relation to Ashkenazi women in the division of labor in Israel by class.⁹ In addition, in November 1990 an article appeared in the journal *Megamot* that looked at “trends of discrimination in the salaries of Mizrahi women and members of Mizrahi ethnic groups in the universities, R & D labs, and hospitals in the period 1972 to 1983.”¹⁰ Recently,

research has been carried out in the field of the history of groups of women in Arab countries, such as that by Esther Meir-Glitzstein on Iraqi women in Youth Aliyah (1997).¹¹ The approach in the great majority of these articles is blind to the issue of the initial location of women in the patriarchal order that places them low on the political and social scale. That is, the theoretical approaches upon which the analysis of Mizrahi women is based do not apply feminist methodology or conceptualization. They continue the lines of argument commonly found in approaches based on the patriarchal point of view. Treatment of the differentiation between the patriarchal viewpoint and the feminist one is discussed in feminist philosophical literature by scholars such as Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, Lynn Hankinson Nelson, and others.¹² This trend extracts its patriarchal bases from pretension to scientific objectivity, shows that it is steeped in values, and proposes alternative approaches to increasing feminist viewpoints whose main thrust is in the adoption of different levels of scientific reflexivity.

I hone and dwell upon concepts, instruments, and theoretical approaches that respond to research expectations from a feminist viewpoint in order to construct a theoretical category identifying the "Mizrahi women in Israel," historically and politically.

A connection exists between the processes of constructing the Mizrahi women's identity and their nullification. We have here a process according to which Mizrahi women are a population segment constituting about one-quarter of the Jewish population of Israel, but who are not recognized as a sociological and political category.

The question of identity in general is a main topic in the development of feminist research. It deals with the sense of self and with experiences establishing this sense of self. In this context, Mizrahi women are a social category of women whose identity draws from Arab-Jewish cultural sources, from the experiences of the encounter between them and the Western world, and also from the experiences that turn them into Mizrahi women in distinction from other Israeli women who lack this experiential world. Mizrahi women, in effect, exist only in Israel. Jewish women who live in Yemen are not Mizrahim, and the same is true for Jewish Iraqi or Moroccan women who lived in those countries. One can only be a Mizrahi woman in Israel. Yet, there are no works on the different life experiences of the Mizrahi women whose world is anchored in the heart of the Israeli experience.

In this situation, to start at the beginning means classifying the many channels that nurtured the process of identity construction for women from Arab and Muslim countries, even sources that reflect the canonical Israeli

historical viewpoint. Channels from which one may extract such materials might be (1) the Arab experience that Mizrahi women have by virtue of having lived in the Muslim and/or Arab country of origin; (2) the immigration experience and having gone through the absorption process from an Arab country into Israel — Western-colonialist in its attitude to Mizrahim; (3) the experience of the transfer to a Western country; and (4) the experience of shifting from a Jewish way of life as lived in the country of origin to, the influences of Judaism as they took shape in Israel. These four areas are divided by two main axes in the establishment of the construction of identity as women and as Mizrahi women in Israel: the patriarchal axis and the Zionist axis. In this sense, Mizrahi women share partial commonality with the other categories of women in Israel. Additional topics of interest involve the differences between the generation of the mothers and that of the daughters who came as children to Israel or were born there.

In the direction of the patriarchal axis, there is special interest in the study of Mizrahi women, since this constitutes a two-faceted area of the experience of oppression, both in the country of origin (the Muslim Arab one) and continued within the family life of the Mizrahi women in Israel; and as it was experienced in a Western version in Israel, mainly when Mizrahi women ventured into the public sphere and took part in it.

My research on this topic focuses on the socio-economic background, presenting through statistics and data a profile of women from Arab, Muslim, and Far Eastern countries, members of the first and second generation who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s — in the mass immigration; and on the images and identities of the Mizrahi women as seen in Israeli culture, through such sources as children's books, literature, cinema, and theater. An analysis of these topics led to a few conclusions, the two principal ones being: first, until the end of the 1980s, Mizrahi women were one-quarter of the Jewish population in Israel; second, they were located at the bottom of the socio-economic scale, far below the non-Mizrahi women. Their position derived from their being part of a public perceived as inferior and lacking the means to grapple with the challenges the Western world presented them. The ramification of these two conclusions was that this is indeed a social category whose characteristics distinguishes them from the other women in Israel.

The denial and opposition to recognizing the existence of this category derives from a broader denial rooted in Western culture. But in the more limited context of Israeli society, this denial appears in full force when viewed against the background of the election of a female Arab Knesset member

that enabled the preening of the left-wing Meretz Party, claiming that it was not only the most liberal party but also the most egalitarian in representing women.¹³ The election of Ms. Husnia Jebara, the first Israeli Arab woman, to the Knesset highlighted the problem of the non-being of Mizrahi women even more, since the identity of Arab women is set in the sense of nationality, and it is even easier to indicate its limits owing to the boundaries between the two civilizations, the Arab and the European. Yet, Mizrahi women are torn between the two and are not fully recognized as having a distinct, separate identity because their world draws culturally on both. These cultures and this merger are not recognized politically, and the result is Mizrahi women's nullification. This topic was never investigated and it provides room for a wide range of studies.

In addition, the cultural differences between Western patriarchy and Judeo-Arabic patriarchy provide a wider external circle for looking into the development of women's identities in countries like Israel in which both the Mizrahi and Western experiences have a role in the construction of women's identities. The cultural differences abound, but one of the most prominent is the patriarchal rhetoric in Israel, which as a liberal Western country spouts promises of equality, while almost all of its citizens come from a background lacking in democratic experience, whether Western or Arab. In Arab and Jewish rhetoric, there are no declared promises of equality — neither from the perspective of ultra-Orthodox Judaism nor that of the Arab patriarchal tradition. Against this background, the Mizrahi women, who underwent the process of change and shift from one civilization to another, at times renounced their old world because of the promise of equality inherent in the switching to a Western lifestyle. But the promises proved false, and the women discovered that they had simply exchanged Mizrahi patriarchal relations for Western patriarchal relations. This topic deserves separate research because of its uniqueness in adding a Western patriarchal layer to the one they were familiar with in their Arab-Muslim countries of origin and in their homes as Jews. What does such an experience do to Mizrahi women? This is a question that has not yet been fully explored in research.

The complicated connections, which play a significant role in the establishment of Mizrahi women's identity and in fashioning their story as a group in Israel, have not been examined. Yet, Mizrahi women's texts exist, of which few have been published, and the rest, as part of their non-being, find it difficult to reach the public. Dorit Rabinyan's writing turns this nothingness into reality, since she is the best known. Yet, Mizrahi women's poetry and literature preceding Rabinyan, which made the actual breakthrough, such as

by Bracha Seri, Atalyia, Tikva Levy, and others, expresses the melding of the experience of being a women and a Mizrahi in Israel.¹⁴ Few of these works give expression to the influence of the Zionist ethos' on Mizrahi women in Israel. It is presented as replete with experiences of oppression and is connected to the "melting-pot" policy.

As a threat to the Western Zionist ethos, Mizrahi culture (but not the folklore!) was suppressed through aggressive Zionism. This was seen in religious coercion, and other means. In all of these, there is no study focusing on Mizrahi woman.

Engendering the Study of Identity of Mizrahi Women

The adoption of the gender approach is essential for explaining the process of the construction of women's identity. This is not a trivial claim in light of the frequency with which women's studies in the social sciences and history repeatedly use the approaches that continue to ignore their identity as women and their experiences.¹⁵

In the gender literature, Butler and Benhabib provided a gender interpretation to Hegel.¹⁶ Their discussion of the concepts of woman's "self" and "identity" is anchored in the dialectic approach, that is, in the development of the construction processes of opposing forces culminating in the unification of the opposites. These scholars dealt with the issue of socio-political life experiences, in the dynamic process of social life, in the deconstruction and reconstruction of identity, and also in the moving between objective and subjective, and between particular and universal. The works by the scholars mentioned above discuss genderization of Hegel's definition of the concept identity. "Identity" is discussed in terms of a sense of self and of continuity. The sense is created through a dynamic process of personal and social life-experiences and interactions;¹⁷ in the course of which symbols, models, and values are acquired consciously and unconsciously.¹⁸

This definition assumes that construction of identity is a dynamic process of constant change influenced by both forces under a person's control and those that are not, which are nurtured by sources extrinsic and intrinsic to the individual's personality. The assumptions behind this definition claim that it is impossible to consider identity an experience of an essentialist nature. Weir analyzes the approaches investigating identity and the tension between those who consider identity a constructive experience versus those who see it as an essentialist experience.¹⁹ She also argues that the process of identity

construction entails a constant search for ways to resolve the internal contradictions and to maintain the individual's sense of self. The perpetual processes of construction develop along dialectic lines.²⁰ These scholars' perception of identity is that the dynamic nature of the process of identity construction can be harmonious and calm or conflictual and crisis-laden. Likewise, the process can be intense or moderate.

Applying this definition of identity, Mizrahi women's sense of self is based on personal experiences acquired consciously and unconsciously, in Arab and Muslim countries, and then in Israel. These experiences merge with the gender experiences of being feminine, which changes from one culture to the other.

Two basic elements in this definition give the Mizrahi women their distinctiveness as a social category: one involves disassembly and construction; the other, the unique life experiences that distinguish them from other women. This definition is compatible with Butler's perception of women's identity as a process of the construction of life experiences.²¹

Another area of research in the study of Mizrahi women looks at the way the process of identity construction links up with the exclusion of women and their being pushed to the margins. A look at the particular sources and content that supplied the processes of identity construction and at the dialectic relation that prevailed between them provides a good starting point.

A frequently encountered argument is that Mizrahi women — similar to everyone coming from Arab and Muslim countries — not being equipped with Western knowledge, found it more difficult than their counterparts who came from the West to fit into the absorption and fusion processes in the Israeli melting pot. This argument tacitly leaves the onus of responsibility upon the Mizrahi women and ignores the aspects of an active policy on the part of the founding fathers, the policy designers, and the women who held public roles in the absorption of Mizrahi women whereby they shoved them to the margins and excluded them from public institutions and sources of power. Pushing them to the periphery was not accidental, it was necessary for the dialectic process of constructing Israeli identity through its contrast to the socioeconomic and cultural life experiences of whoever came from non-Western countries: The Mizrahi women (as did the Mizrahi men) provided these life experiences. This assumption must be supported by historical study within the Israeli context after the establishment of the state. Inherent here is a great deal of material connected to the life experiences bound up with an aggressive process of estrangement from and expunging of the

cultural heritage of Jewish men and women as shaped over the course of their history in Arab and Muslim countries. The problem is that this material is not to be found. It is simply inconceivable that the canonic research will provide a venue for taking upon itself the responsibility for the invisibility of the Mizrahi women.

Thus, the trends in research that deal with postmodernism, post-Zionism, and postcolonialism provide a methodological conceptualization and structure helpful in analyzing the gender, political, and cultural situation that led to the creation of the circumstances that flung the Mizrahi women to the margins.²²

Beyond its cultural, political, and economic aspects, the problem is particularly embedded in the identity crisis in which Mizrahi Jews in Israel find themselves, a crisis that in the case of women requires a separate analysis that crosschecks the elements establishing the Mizrahi women's identity, from both the ethnic as well as the gender aspect. Another research facet focuses on how the Mizrahi women coped with the reality of the melting pot from which arose the experience of the effacement their identity, as they have reported it in personal interviews and writing.²³

The Melting Pot Policy — Erasure of Different Shades and the Demand to Become Ashkenazim

Colonialism was a central element in the melting pot policy, and the absorption policy of the founding fathers drew, as is known, on that concept. The meaning of the melting pot in the case of immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries was the disassembly and reconstruction of identity. This policy even had a name explicitly demonstrating this: de-socialization and re-socialization. It was based on studies and observations by educators such as K. Frankenstein and K. Feuerstein and was planned by establishment sociologists such as S. Eisenstadt and R. Bar-Yosef.²⁴ The methods for implementing the melting pot concept included aggressive, compulsive policies such as the enforcement of birth control (L. Salzberger), religious coercion (or anti-religious practices like cutting the sidelocks of children at school reported in the investigation public committee — Frumkin), the transfer of children from one school to another with a dry notice to the parents about the backwardness of their children, and directing the children to occupational educational tracks or to frameworks intended for the developmentally disabled.²⁵ This kind of thinking, according to Said, attributed to the Orient

inferiority and backwardness as part of the definition of the Other as a consequence of its defining itself.²⁶

As part of this approach, the narrative of Mizrahi women's history is missing. It is sufficient to note that in textbooks, today as in the past, the story of the population that immigrated to Israel from Arab and Muslim countries is told in no more than eleven pages out of four-hundred.²⁷ And when it is mentioned, the texts stress racial stereotypes such as slowness and backwardness. In this sense, the canonic history books are not a reliable source for the genderization of the story of the Mizrahim in Israel.²⁸ If I have said that the definition of identity is an issue of a sense of self and continuity of the symbols, values, and patterns acquired through social and personal interactions, then what the Mizrahim were supposed to undergo to be absorbed was the dismantling and the cancellation of the sense of self, to alienate themselves from the values and symbols that had nurtured their identity — in effect, the negation of their concept of the self. The success of absorption was conditional upon a process of alienation from a sense of self, with its Mizrahi content.²⁹

Thus, women who arrived from Kurdistan had not been exposed to the experience of being natives (in the eyes of the colonialists), but they did not escape it since they went through it in Israel as part of the melting pot whereas Moroccan women did not escape this fate either in the country of origin or in Israel. Their position as part of the generalized category of "Mizrahi women" effected this with regard to the Moroccan women in the process of their absorption. The degree of exposure to colonialism among those who came from the large cities and those who came from the Atlas Mountains villages was completely ignored.

To sum up, in the shadow of this absorption policy, the chances for immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries to be absorbed successfully remained slim as long as they had not divested themselves of components of identity perceived as inferior and primitive. This explanation by itself is enough to indicate their low placement on the social scale and limited capacity for social mobility. If we add to it the exposure of the patriarchal elements, the research potential for revealing in full force this diverse group of Mizrahi women in Israel *considered as non-being* emerges immediately.

The striving for social homogenization in the Eurocentric spirit suppressed the varied life experiences and the different cultural values and habits of Mizrahi women and in so doing, determined the distance from the hegemonic center as the measure for success in absorption. So women coming from a rather varied social background, distributed over a significant part

of the Earth, from Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Iraq, Kurdistan, Iran, Algeria, Jerba, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Aleppo (Syria), Morocco, Cochin, and India, were perceived as a single mass. We see that the study of these processes constitutes a chapter in itself focusing on the Mizrahi gender-identity crises. The fruits of such research have the potential for social and political lessons for general society.

Even if the women's narrative is a kind of repetition of a similar story that took place among the men, or if this is a repetition of the story of what took place in the Arab countries, this is herstory and it should be told separately with its unknown chapters, because it is missing from the history books. There is an additional facet to this, too, and it is the fact that the Mizrahi women are also part of the women's population of Israel, for whom the same problem holds when speaking of the canonic Israeli historical narrative. It is worthwhile to stress here that the herstory of Israeli women does not guarantee the exposure of the Mizrahi women's story, and certainly not the story of the relations among them. The material available on this issue deals almost exclusively with observing children and folk crafts even if gently and sympathetically.³⁰ The results of collecting, sorting, documenting, and analyzing historical materials from the melting pot period, written by Mizrahi women, are now being published little by little.³¹ In my study of women who came from Arab and Muslim countries during the mass immigration of the 1950s, I found that where Mizrahi women are mentioned — in official state documents such as reports of the courts; the welfare and employment offices; educational and occupational assessments — their image among the Israeli public (Mizrahi and non-Mizrahi) is one of women whose morals are doubtful and whose ability for economic and social mobility is low (some of these results, such as their limited capability for social mobility, were still valid at the end of the 1990s).³²

From what little we do have, one may learn that the collection of life experiences of women who came from Arab and Muslim countries, from a way of life in an Arab/Muslim environment that was exposed to varying degrees of colonialism, whether in the country of origin or in Israel, reveals coping and detachment accompanying the life stories of these women. All of them indicate that they were thrown into a situation at the crossroads between the axis of Mizrahi identity and the axis of gender. All of them describe life experiences that turned into leg irons, making their mobility difficult and at times perpetuating their marginality. In any event, what they were required to do was make a decision over dilemmas concerning processes of the construction of their identity, mainly as Mizrahim and only after that as Mizrahi women.

Dilemmas and the Ways that Mizrahi Women Coped with Them

The responses by the female immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries to the demands of the melting pot were varied and derived from factors indicated above, such as exposure to Western culture, urban or rural environments, and cultural differences among the different Arab countries and their influence on the lives of the Jews in them. One may classify these factors according to three sources behind the dilemmas faced by the Mizrahi women: (1) dilemmas deriving from the link to Jewishness as understood within the framework of the Zionist ethos; (2) dilemmas deriving from Eurocentricism as experienced through colonialism; and (3) dilemmas created by the meeting between the Arab Muslim framework from which they came and the Israeli reality that they entered.

The Mizrahi women, by coming from a traditional Jewish world that took shape in a Muslim/Arab environment, were trapped between what they were and what they were expected to be. Clashes between cultural, traditional, ideological, and religious life experiences resulted in confusion and different combinations in which these immigrants were trapped when they had to cope with the dismantling and construction of their identity. Imagine, for instance, the influence of de-socialization and re-socialization processes on women exposed to Western culture in their country of origin, in cities such as Alexandria, Baghdad, or Casablanca, where an *aliyah* activist promised them a brave new world, who upon their arrival in Israel were sent to moshavim in the Adullam or Lachish regions, which at first were nothing more than arid spaces isolated from any other inhabited site; or their encounter with women who had not been exposed at all to the West or to the colonialist experience. And then compare that with what happened to those who were housed on the outskirts of the cities. How did that policy influence women from Yemen or Kurdistan who had never been exposed to Western culture? What happened to them when they were settled in far-away outlying regions or, alternatively, were housed in arid marginal areas planned as development towns? This material has never been investigated. Complexity and confusion became more severe when the women had to make a decision over dilemmas of Jewishness. They could choose the traditional interpretation of religion as they had known it and followed it in their Arab, or Muslim, country of origin, or choose the European interpretation that were exposed to in Israel. Within the European interpretation, they faced another decision: Zionist, or ultra-Orthodox, or even anti-religion as

manifested in secular, socialist Zionism, instituted at first mainly in the Mapam and Ha-Shomer ha-Tza'ir kibbutzim. These alternatives presented to Mizrahi women were totally submerged in the various establishment policies: education, welfare, settlement, housing, and employment. Every decision yielded benefits and the allotment of resources but also exacted a cultural, social, ethical price. At times, choosing the melting pot was expressed by the dissolution of the family, feelings of guilt, cultural vapidness, alienation, and loss of a sense of continuity and self. In terms of dialectic analysis, deconstruction of identity is an issue of negation and alienation of the sense of self and continuity. Fanon, who investigated colonial influence on blacks, found that with the strong desire of the non-Europeans to be accepted and Westernized, they went through a process of self-negation that always remains an imitation and is never completely internalized. Toni Morrison described it as internalizing the slave, and seeing the self as inferior in light of colonialist values in contrast to the colonialist who is always originally white and European. Both Morrison as well as Fanon see in this process "whiteness," paralleled in our case by "Ashkenaziness," that is, wearing a white mask on dark skin.³³ Investigation of these processes is likely to shed clear light on the dimensions of the depth or superficiality of the Mizrahim's integration into Israeli society, the ways Israeli and Sabra patterns are adopted, and even on the differences between these patterns and those of the children of Jews who came from Europe and America.³⁴ Alternatively, the women's rejection of the option of fusion means choosing the option of "otherness." A fairly significant group among the Mizrahim could not even take advantage of these possibilities for dismantling and creating their identity, since its members' external appearance — dark skin — allowed them no way out. Women from Cochin and Yemen, from Iran and Kurdistan, found themselves in the situation that Fanon calls a white mask on black skin, that is, basic otherness that cannot be escaped even by processes of de- or re-socialization.

Considering all this, what turned the women from Arab and Muslim countries into *Mizrahi women* was a combination of four factors: being from Arab or Muslim countries; being Jewish — traditional, religious, or secular; the extent of their exposure to Western colonialism; and the extent of their exposure to Zionism. No matter what combination, all of these types were steeped in oppressive patriarchal patterns even if according to different codes of tradition and culture.

If we link the historical content with the definition of the Mizrahi women's identity and their life experiences in any combination, we will find that a not insignificant portion of the Mizrahi women of the first and second

generations were ensnared in an identity crisis, even though between the generations this trap had diverse manifestations that outwardly differentiated between them. Two conclusions can be drawn from this: first, Mizrahi women are not defined as such because of their country of origin, but because they are doubly suppressed in comparison to Mizrahi men and in comparison to non-Mizrahi women. What turns this personal experience into a political experience, and therefore one located at the heart of gender discourse, are its consequences. For, from this point of view, the Mizrahi women become visible and defined as a group separate and distinct from the two social categories mentioned. Second, Mizrahi women were not a homogeneous part of ethnic groups or of the members of ethnic groups. In any event, the results of the crisis they faced weighed down these women like leg irons, weakening their ability to climb higher on the social scale, and this remains the situation with the third generation, too. Thus, the research agenda on the subject of Mizrahi women should center on two focal points: one, raising the category to such a level that it will be recognized as distinct and separate; the other, concentrating on the methods of identity construction, on its being established from cultural content and from passage from Arab to Western civilization, and on the crises and consequences involved in that passage. We must develop goals for the study of the different histories, such that neither the narrative of the women in Israel nor that of the Mizrahi Jews will be lost.

