Women and Gender in Early Jewish and Palestinian Nationalism  by Sheila H. Katz
Review by: Frances Hasso
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is an added bonus that makes for an informative reading. This book can serve, in part or as a whole, as a text for gender, Islamic, and/or Middle Eastern studies courses.

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Reviewed by Frances Hasso

Sheila Katz structures her study on the premise that early Jewish and Palestinian nationalisms were more similar than different, as were the gender problems women in both movements faced. Her text aims to avoid the “polarization and tensions” (p. xiii) of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and is structured on the laudable goals of coexistence, peace and interconnection between what she views as reconcilable projects. Her historical focus is Palestine from the 1860s to the 1940s, and her data are secondary and published (English-language) primary sources.

Chapter 1 argues that the dominant historical narratives have perpetuated the conflict, which “depends at least in part on control of actual women and of women as symbols” (p. 4), by ignoring gender and women. Chapter 2 reviews feminist analyses of women and gender in nationalisms, women-focused regional social histories, and some more recent gender-focused studies of the conflict. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on Jewish settlement and state developments, as well as ideological, identity, organizational, and media trajectories in both movements during the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods, respectively.

Chapter 5 argues that men in the two movements viewed nationalism as a vehicle for proving or achieving their masculinities (p. 70)—for Jewish Zionist men through defense of the nation and for Palestinian nationalists through sacrifice for the nation. For the “new Jewish man” of political Zionism, the project was sold as an opportunity to end the “powerlessness” (feminization-emasculating) of minority life (p. 70). For Palestinian men, the manner in which Zionism exiled them and “usurped [their] rights” of sovereignty was similarly represented as degrading (feminizing-emasculating) (p. 77). In Chapter 6, Katz argues that in Jewish nationalist imagery and discourses, Zionism was presented as a uniting of men (lovers) with land (bride), excluding women from the project (p. 87). Palestinian nationalist narratives similarly analogized sexual control over women with sovereignty over land, and feminized land and nation (pp. 82-83).

Chapters 7 through 9 examine how men in both movements discursively imagined and practically situated women’s bodies so that they “became a symbol of the immutable and eternal national qualities of an ancient people, the daily producer of an authentic national culture, the reproducer of new citizens, and the way to measure progress, modernity, and legitimacy” (p. 95). Key to this national “contest” of legitimacy were mothering, hygiene, housekeeping practices, women’s status and the education of girls. Chapter 10 argues that fictional representations by Arabs and Zionists relied on representations of women (as oppressed, sexually free, deceptive, corrupt, seductive, needing protection) and men (as rapists, protectors, sexual predators, pimps, belligerent, emasculated, lazy) to make the case “that there were irrevocable, irreconcilable, essential differences between the two groups” (p. 134). Chapter 11 discusses how the two movements limited and provided emancipatory opportunities for women. Chapter 12 focuses on “boundary-crossing,” social sharing, and mutual protection incidents that occurred between Palestinians and Jewish settlers.

This book is interesting, readable, and
somewhat effectively makes the case for the parallels upon which the study is premised. Problems with the study include over-simplified statements and limited or no source referencing at various points (e.g., regarding Palestinian focus on labor market exclusion rather than on colonial exploitation, p. 41; the Deir Yassin massacre and Palestinian exodus, pp. 63-64, 142; fear of rape among Arabs and Jews, p. 141). The book is also problematic given its symmetrical framework for an asymmetrical conflict in which Zionism has been expansionist and settler-colonial while Palestinian nationalism (warts and all) developed largely in response to it. The study too often falls into rationalizations that blunt its intellectual contribution.

A related flaw is the assumption that identities and material locations can be disaggregated so that, for example, the “womanlessness” of women (their biological bodies and subject positions as mothers) supersedes their material interests/locations, ideologies, and cultural and emotional connections with their communities. The book confounds the discourses and practices of nationalist men with nationalism, assuming that a nationalist (and I would add, religious, racial, or class) position/subjectivity would be “unnatural” or “false” for women because of the patriarchal and misogynist structuring of many of these movements and their symbolism. Women can be agents of violence, racism, and exclusion, as men can be agents of non-violence, anti-racism, and inclusion. The meanings of manhood or womanhood are very much imbricated in class, race, national locations, as well as particular historical contexts. It is crucial that the “bridge-building” the author advocates recognize such imbrications and address fundamental asymmetries in power and resources.

Frances S. Hasso, Assistant Professor of Gender & Women’s Studies and Sociology, Oberlin College, is the author of the forthcoming Divergent Protest Histories: Gender and Nation in the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Bodies on the Line: Rethinking Political Conflict and Violence through Gender and Sexuality (co-edited with Paola Bacchetta).

Recent Publications

Prepared with assistance by Andrew Clark and Priscilla Diana Ponrajah

BIOGRAPHY

Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography, by Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 272 pages. Map. Notes to p. 318. Gloss. to p. 321. Chron. to p. 327. Sel. bibl. to p. 344. Index to p. 354. $27.50. The authors present a comprehensive biography of Palestinian leader Yasir ‘Arafat. The book traces Arafat’s leadership as he takes control of the Palestinian resistance movement, which takes firmer shape under his direction. The book follows ‘Arafat’s movements from Palestine to Kuwait, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and back to Palestine. ‘Arafat is shown to have evolved through the years “as he rewrites his origins, experiments with guerrilla war, develops a doctrine of terrorism, fights endless diplomatic battles, and builds a movement” on multiple fronts. (PDP)

ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestinian Conflict, by Norman G. Finkelstein. London, UK and New York: Verso, 2003. Second edition. xxxviii + 183 pages. Appendix to p. 198. Notes to p. 280. Index to p. 287. $20 paper. In the second edition of this critical study of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the international best-selling author of The Holocaust Industry presents an in-depth review of the origins and concepts of Zionism. Finkelstein refutes the arguments of Joan Peters that Palestinians had, in effect, conjured up their genealogies out of thin air; of Benny Morris that the Palestinian refugee problem was “a consequence of war and not design”; and of Anita Shapira that an underlying assumption of the Zionist movement was that the realization of its goals “would not require the use of force” (p. 2). In the