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Women's Activism in Palestine/Israel: Another Perspective

Lihy Ben Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions: Women's Activism on the Israeli and Palestinian Religious Right* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016). Pp. 282. Hardback. ISBN: 978-0-691-16456-4.

Since the late 1980s, the most significant feminist literature analysing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in a few cases the internal struggles in both societies, has focused on the role of gender and women in attempts at achieving peace and solving the conflict itself. Several works have suggested a deep understanding of the way in which Palestinian and Israeli women's organisations have been key actors in the field of such an endless conflict. In a reality in which nationalism, neoliberalism and settler colonialism are closely interconnected and have become the most powerful forces shaping everyday life of both the 'occupier' and the 'occupied', the majority of contemporary feminist and women's studies have been about different types of socio-political activism, but almost always secular activism.

From an alternative perspective, Lihy Ben Shitrit's book thoroughly explores four cases of conservative religious women's activism. It looks at women's role in the Jewish settlers' movement on the West Bank, Hamas (the Islamic resistance movement in Palestine), the ultra-orthodox Shas movement and the Islamic movement in Israel. The first two cases are described as nationalist, the third as proselytising and the last as both nationalist and proselytising. The four cases are carefully analysed and compared in terms of power, resources and the state.

The author uses political theory and anthropological methods such as participant observation and formal and informal interviews to compare the case studies and explain their differences and similarities. As she investigates women's activities in the four movements, Ben Shitrit takes account of categories of complementarian activism, i.e. forms of activism that follow the hegemonic division between male and female roles within the movement, different types of protest and their formal representation. As a result, she provides a comprehensive study of each movement, with only a partial exception for Hamas due to the fact that she was unable to enter the Gaza Strip and had trouble getting in touch with Hamas activists on the West Bank.

Starting with the theoretical core of her research project, i.e. the construction of what she defines as "frames of exception", she regards these forms of women's political participation as exceptional responses to the exceptional times that women are experiencing every day. This focus is original in that these women activists have interrupted rather than questioned some of the impositions resulting from their movement's gender ideology in order to achieve their most important goals. This point deserves special attention since it constitutes an innovative glance at the role of female activists who have decided to become politically engaged in non-egalitarian gender movements but who have also overcome their conservative doctrines.

The most important achievement in this book is the voice given to women activists who have changed their actions from transgressive to righteous, women who have been unheard for a long time both within and outside their societies. Unlike previous studies, the focal point in this book is the initiatives and discourses of women activists in conservative religious-political movements founded on patriarchal religious premises. Shitrit's careful, comprehensive consideration of these different forms of activism gives us a deep understanding of current changes in a reality that seems to be paralysed in an inextricable status quo.

In challenging the common overview of the mainstream feminist literature concerning women's and feminist activism in Palestine and Israel, Lihi Ben Shitrit has been able to awaken interest in a subject that has so far remained invisible and unexplored. She has used a comparative framework to balance her theoretical contribution with her ethnographic research into the four case studies. Such an extended but detailed perspective is not to be taken lightly, due to the variety of situations, communities and initiatives analysed in her fieldwork. It is clear from her interviews and participant observation that she uses an appropriate reflexive methodology that demonstrates her understanding of the peculiarity of women activists' role in their own specific backgrounds.

This book is an important addition to current literature on gender, nationalism, religion and conflicts. Shitrit's approach shows that it is still feasible to analyse Palestine and Israel from an innovative perspective, dealing with the heterogeneity of political and social forms of activism among religious women in conservative movements. So far the main discussions have concentrated on secular women activists and their strategies for changing the status quo. Ben Shitrit's study has a new focus with the idea of including contemporary political alternatives introduced by Palestinian and Israeli religious Jewish women.