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The Wounded Lion

Eleanor Roffman

I have taught in Lesley University's Israeli extension program's summer school for five years. Each year I have tried to sort out the complex discomfort and feelings of tension that I would experience during my time teaching. I knew some was due to cultural difference, some to the political climate of the country, some to the inner conflict I was feeling, and some to my preconceptions and expectations. When I was able to contextualize my feelings and thinking as part of the experience of teaching in a war zone in a militarized culture, was I able to label and understand the tension and my discomfort.

For the past twenty five years I have been involved in the international struggle for peace with justice in the Mideast. It has been a personal journey that has been difficult at times, but one in which I presently and solidly support the rights of the Palestinian people to a state of their own. I have been unable to explore any aspect of culture and life in Israel-Palestine without being mindful of the ongoing conflict and my position regarding the conflict. At this point in time, during the second Intifada, (summer, 2002) the conflict has spiraled into a war. The Israelis have the power of an organized military state, one of the best equipped in the world, supported by the most powerful nation, the U.S., and the Palestinians have the power of an army of resistance with their mortars, rifles, and plantings of bombs. In the past, I have traveled several times to the West Bank and Gaza, mostly on delegations that have focused on the living conditions of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories.

Teaching within the borders of Israel to an almost exclusive Israeli population opened my eyes to the living conditions of the Israeli students. Most of the students are middle class, members of the dominant European (Ashkenazi) group. They had been characterized to me as being arrogant, demanding, somewhat histrionic and manipulative. These are labels familiar to me. They have often been used psychologically to describe women who were engaged in some act of resistance within the dominant culture in this country. These labels are those attached to women as they seek to empower themselves within a male dominated culture.

The lens through which I was now viewing the students was one that made gender visible within the context of a political struggle in a militarized society. The gender sensitive lens is multidimensional because it brings into focus the relationship between gender and politics. In this situation, gender is central to understanding both the collective and individual identities as well as understanding the conflict and its possibilities for resolution (Sharoni, 1995)

War is an aspect of daily life in Israel; it is a normalized part of the culture. It resides in an ideology that perceives war as a reasonable way to solve problems. In order to have a militaristic society; it is necessary not only to have an organized military, but the social institutions that support the military. The distribution of labor in a militaristic society is divided along gender lines. (Mazali, 2002) This is central to a military state. Women play specific roles in maintaining militarism. Women are praised when they follow the dichotomized social roles and accept their tasks as reproducers and caretakers (Sharoni, 1995).

An important aspect of Israeli Jewish culture is the history of persecution, and the experience of genocide. This contributes to a kill or die mentality, and contributes also to the masculinization of the culture which has been shaped, in part, by the historical image of the Jewish male in Europe during the Nazi regime. That image is of a humiliated, disempowered man. Interestingly, images of women during the Holocaust are more sympathetic. Women are portrayed as more resourceful. Israeli reaction to Jewish history gives precedence to the masculine and the military in Jewish society in Israel. Military precedence within Israeli society maintains and recreates the privileges enjoyed by military men and institutions (Mazali, 2002). Calls of never again; we have no choice (ain breira in Hebrew); we are on the verge of genocidal extinction; we have few friends and many enemies, are rooted historically, and yet are very much alive in Israeli culture in a powerfully emotional way.

In Israel as in other societies, women's major role in militarization is to reproduce and to nurture. (Enloe, 1993) In order for women to do this, they need to maintain a certain degree of silence about their participation in the military project. They put the needs of the state first, and their own needs become secondary (Mazali, 2002). In the army, women have experienced harassment and discrimination as part of their military experience. Most often they suppress their feelings, telling themselves it is no big deal, and many incidents are not reported, and often women opt for silence (Mazali, 2002). As Cynthia Enloe states, "making women invisible hides the working of both femininity and masculinity in international politics, then by making men visible as men we can expose the working of masculinity and femininity in world politics "(Enloe in Sharoni, 1995)

Furthermore, women as mothers need to prepare their children for participation in the military. Questioning military service as a necessary part of development is pathologized within the culture. Accepting military service and ideology is central to the ain breira ideology in Israel. Women are pressured to marry and have children. They are marginal to the society if they have not fulfilled these roles. Although abortion is legal in Israel, it is widely discouraged, and Israel supports one of the most sophisticated reproduction technologies in the world.

When thinking differently about the inevitability of solving conflict through military means or questioning women' role in the interest of the state becomes pathologized and marginalized, people resort to individualistic notions. They just want to live their lives and not be bothered with all that is going on around them (Mazali, 2002). I have heard women say that they can only cope with the needs of their families, that tending to what is going on outside their immediate sphere is burdensome. Individualism, alienation and denial is expressed vividly in the classroom, especially in the courses I teach, Examining power, privilege and oppression within the expressive therapies, and The psychology of women. Both these courses are graduate level courses that are required courses within the Expressive Therapies Division and within the Women's Studies Program in the Israeli program.

I would like to share two examples that exemplify the silence that is draped around concepts of gender. In the course, Examining power, privilege and oppression within the expressive therapies, I engaged the students in an exercise that asked them to consider what behaviors of

theirs were more strongly masculine or feminine according to the cultural norms of their society. Students were asked to draw, sculpt or use other creative media to express their gendered selves and to identify parts of themselves that reflected an integration of masculine and feminine. None of the students were able to construct an integrated image of self. Almost all the women expressed only feminine parts of self, and the few men only expressed their masculine aspects. My initial response was to see the students as resistant. I think about it differently now. They were expressing their acculturation and social role adaptation. I was expecting representations that more closely resembled my assumptions of educated women and men living within a struggle, rather than identification with traditional female and male roles and values. What I did not fully comprehend was the vulnerability they experienced living within a military state, and the impact of military ideology on the very issue we were dealing with, gender roles.

In The psychology of women course, I asked women to consider if they thought motherhood was an essential aspect of women's experience or if it was socially constructed. Additionally, I asked them where they would identify themselves on the spectrum between these two ways of understanding women's roles. Their responses reflected what I thought was a powerful paradox. The majority of women felt that being a mother was an essentialist experience, that women have a biological drive to reproduce, yet they all thought that how they were to raise their children and how many children they would have was a function of the social values of the state. They acknowledged the pressures of the state to raise their children a certain way, to teach them young that they can expect to go to the army. They told me that they taught their children to suppress their vulnerabilities, and that being sensitive is a handicap. Many acknowledged that they were transmitting what had been handed down to them. I have found that the majority of Israeli students experience a sense fear and terror, because they see no choice but the military. They are wounded by their fear, recognize their military strength, and yet feel out of control.

In both these classroom situations, when I could abandon my perception of their position as resistance, and see what they were representing as authentic and true to their experience, I could be a resource for conversation, a conversation that reached into the minds and hearts of the students. Given permission to participate in a nonjudging environment, the students were willing to go beyond their individual experience and engage in a broader contextualized discourse about their lives and the impact of the context of their lives on their work.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, describing Israeli women's struggle with gender is a way to talk about the conflict that brings to the surface the struggles of women in a different light. By encouraging women to discuss the everyday aspects of their thinking and their behavior is bringing to light the ways women contribute to the infrastructures of their society. By identifying those ways are women able to question the assumptions that shape their society, and thereby become more informed about their situation and better able to become agents of social and political change.

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