



Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh. *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xvii + 283 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-22944-0; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22379-0.



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Published on H-Levant (December, 2003)

Modernity, Nationalism, and Reproduction

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In this “widely accessible” book, to quote Hanan Ashrawi in the introduction (p. xi), Rhoda Kanaaneh centers on reproduction and family planning in the Galilee—“her” Galilee, since she grew up there—as a crucial site upon which Palestinians “navigate the vast, diverse, and interrelated terrains of nationalism, class, identity, health, the body, and gender” (p. 251). In an analysis that is simultaneously sophisticated and vernacular, she dissects how reproductive strategies of Palestinian citizens of Israel are complex signifiers of nation, identity, and modernity, as well as tactics of resistance to, and mimicry of, Israeli expressions of domination, political power, and culture. One of her ultimate aims is no less than to challenge the stereotype of the “passive,” “ignorant,” and “traditional” Third World woman who is held responsible “for impending global catastrophe,” as “the world’s very survival depends on containing [her] reproduction (rather than, say, limiting levels of consumption or industrial expansion in developed countries, or raising the standard of living in the Third World)” (pp. 256, 27). This book successfully demonstrates that planning

a family, giving birth, raising children, and providing for them are much more complexly embedded in, and reflective of, social and political processes than the ordinary human would conceive.

One of the book’s many major contributions is that it provides an intimate and probing portrait of Palestinian society in Israel and the ambivalent position it has occupied since 1948. The transformations Palestinian citizens of Israel have experienced have paralleled to some degree the experiences of Jewish Israelis, in a society which has become consumerist and self-consciously “modern.” Yet the Palestinian experience differs in fundamental ways which reflect asymmetries of power and which express sometimes subtle methods of resistance to state power and Jewish Israeli nationalism. As Kanaaneh shows, through this complex process which incorporates resistance that “draws on domination” and often “mimics power” (p. 17), Palestinian citizens of Israel give expression to a form of nationalism which is distinctively their own, and disparate in many respects from Palestinian nationalist discourse in the occupied territories and the diaspora.

Chapter 1, "Babies and Boundaries," explores the "significance of population and reproduction in thinking, creating, and sustaining the Israeli nation-state" (p. 23). The fears of the Israeli state that its lower birth rate will result in a lower Jewish to Arab ratio and the measures taken to defuse the demographic "time bomb" (p. 61) are well-known. For instance, in the early years of the state, as Kanaaneh notes, mothers were granted awards for bearing ten children, and in the 1960s, a Fund for Encouraging Birth was established to offer allowances to Jewish families with three or more children (pp. 35-36). (The maternal awards were discontinued when it turned out most of the claimants were Arab women.) In treading this well-covered ground, Kanaaneh expands the analysis, however, linking Israeli population policies, census-making, land owning, family planning, and housing discrimination to reproductive policies and practices. The Israeli state and Palestinian citizens both articulate a discourse of pronatalism, which are constructed out of the relationship between the two communities—a relationship derived from asymmetries of power. The state embarks on policies to encourage higher Jewish birth rates and bring about lower "Arab" ones, whereas Palestinian pronatalism is an expression of nationalism and opposition to the state's policies. "Underlying the whole discussion of political arithmetic is an attempt to encode women's bodies ... for state power" (p. 65). As Kanaaneh demonstrates in every chapter, Palestinians articulate counter discourses to (what one assumes are) the dominant discourse. She shows the complexity, fluidity and flexibility of Palestinian strategies under Israeli rule. For example, the counter discourse to the pronatalist one which defiantly conceives Palestinian women as having a "military womb that gives birth to fighters" (p. 65) is one that conceives of limiting Palestinian births to create a "highly educated, professional middle class" which offers a different kind of weapon in the national struggle.

As she incisively points out, both perspectives "have unwittingly accepted one of [the Israeli agenda's] basic premises by closely associating nationalism with reproduction and women" (p. 63).

Chapter 2 discusses how family planning has become a signifier of modernity, particularly in the way that it connects to a new consumerism in Galilee society. As she shows, Palestinians have bought into the understanding that "modernity requires a high degree of consumption and a high level of spending" (p. 87). Kanaaneh provides numerous first person narratives in which Palestinian women, conscious of being "modern" mothers, explain

why they plan to limit their families. One example given here is that in order to be able to provide more of the "luxurious necessities" such as computers and clothes—"outfits," as they put it—to fewer children, and to more "properly" plan their families. Many of these "modern" women criticize "primitive" women who do not limit their children, and thus are not concerned enough with "quality" as opposed to "quantity."

In chapter 3, "Fertile Differences," Kanaaneh brilliantly traces the way that being "reproductively modern" equates with being "advanced," and how being identified as such—or the opposite, "primitive"—has political and cultural connotations, and codes one's identity. Teachers, for example, judge children's intelligence by whether or not they come from a "reproductively modern" family; she visited a class where only those children so marked were called on by the teachers. She examines the Israeli discourse that high fertility rates are the cause of underdevelopment and a key characteristic of "traditional" society, dissecting the way that reproduction has become "one of the primary ways in which difference and hierarchy ... are imagined, articulated and daily re-asserted," not only between Jew and Arab, but also among Palestinians themselves (p. 122).

Chapter 4, "Modernizing the Body," discusses modernization and medicalization of the female body, as exemplified not only in new methods of medical control of reproduction, but also in the ways that Palestinians conceive of the modern, female body. Kanaaneh traces a link between care for the female body and companionate marriage; in planning her family, the "modern" woman takes care to maintain her attractiveness to her husband, for example, through such decisions as how many children to bear and when to wean a child, thus controlling the wear and tear effected on their bodies. Sex education, contraception, assisted conception (called "planting") are all examined here. Kanaaneh convincingly demonstrates that all of these act as markers of modernity, as her subjects argue in the pages of the book, decrying "primitive" superstition and "myths," and embracing modern Science with a capital "S."

Chapter 5 deals with the preference for sons, and how Palestinians have managed to "modernize" the discourse on this resilient predilection through rationalizing it in the context of modernity. "Preference for sons is often constructed as a practical matter of economic necessity in a backward society—part of a rational economizing family planning strategy in a context that favors boys. In a system 'that you and I can't change,' it is thus only ratio-

nal to want a son" (pp. 236-237).

Although in every chapter, Kanaaneh presents the counter-discourses (usually antimodernization) to the dominant ones (usually promodernization), and shows the plurality and even fluidity of Palestinian opinion on reproductive issues, a major underlying thematic thread which links all of the chapters and runs throughout the book is the extent to which Palestinians mirror and internalize Israeli assumptions about themselves. "With the increasing modernization of Palestinian society and its integration into a global economy of consumption and desire, the aspiration to become like the Western Jews, sometimes bordering on self-hatred, is evident, even as it is challenged by Jewish and Palestinian nationalism and romanticism" (p. 164). She singles out nationalism and national identity as the major sites of resistance to this dynamic. As she points out, it is precisely in the categories of "Jew" and "Arab" where "modernism's failure to fulfill its promises and to assimilate everyone into its fold" is most acutely felt (p. 156). After all, she notes, "if even the poorest American can still have the local equivalent of the American dream, many Palestinians find it difficult to have an Israeli dream. While modernization has a homogenizing appeal, Israeli nationalism does not. Zionism has never carried the promise of 'integration as a reward for acculturation'" (p. 156).[1] Thus Palestinians' embrace of modernity, with its consumerist and scientific connotations, is complicated by their deeply felt national identity in a state which utilizes reproductive strategies to define them as other. Kanaaneh manages to connect many lines in an intricate argument.

This book is path-breaking on a number of levels. It exemplifies the best of recent scholarship which uses gender as a category of analysis, and demonstrates its imbrication in every aspect of human social organization. Underlying Kanaaneh's analyses is the recognition that gender, in Joan Scott's words, "is a primary way of signifying relationships of power." [2] Kanaaneh successfully demonstrates how gender matters as a crucial aspect of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which has not ever been so thoroughly, systematically, and seriously explored. Reproduction, as she points out, has "been a pivotal arena" for Israel's project of "self-Occidentizing itself" through

"Orientalizing ... its Palestinian population" (p. 252). At the core of this project, and its modernizing discourse, are issues of power.

On the theoretical and methodological levels, the scholarship is innovative, engaging, and creative. Kanaaneh seamlessly navigates between comprehensive personal commentaries and histories of a wide range of individuals—who apparently spoke freely about the most intimate subjects—and sophisticated utilization of theoretical works on reproduction in other Third World contexts. Out of this comes the author's own theoretical insights which are informed not only by her informants, but also by her own experiences and history.

An interesting and helpful supplement to the text is the inclusion of numerous illustrations such as popular Palestinian art, advertisements, cartoons, photographs, statistical tables, political booklets, maps, and other figures. The book is rare (in my experience) because it appeals to both specialists and non-specialists alike. It could, for example, be effectively and enjoyably used in teaching university students who are not at elite institutions. This is because not only does it offer provocative theoretical insights, but these are written in a style that is simultaneously sophisticated and lucid, something sadly lacking in much academic writing. The reader discerns the writer's deep empathy for, and engagement with, her human subjects, which is leavened with humor, irony, and, in places, a certain amount of detachment coupled with wry self-awareness. Yet another achievement of this book is that its appeal and the insights it offers extend beyond those who are interested in the Middle East, Israel, and Palestine. Rhoda Kanaaneh has much to tell and tells it with consummate skill.

Notes

[1]. She quotes Aziza Khazoom, "Western Culture, Ethnic Stigma, and Social Closure: The Origins of Ethnic Inequalities in Israel," paper presented at the meeting of the Israeli Anthropological Association, Nazareth (March, 1999), p. 1.

[2]. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 42.

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Citation: Ellen Fleischmann. Review of Kanaaneh, Rhoda Ann, *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel*. H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.

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