Lilly White Feminism and Academic Apartheid in Israel

SMADAR LAVIE

On December 26, 2001, Ariyeh Caspi exhorted in Israel’s highbrow Ha’aretz Weekly that only 8.8% of those holding full professor’s rank in Israeli universities were women. In his article “Search for the Woman,” the journalist nonetheless neglected to mention that all these women professors are members of Israel’s Ashkenazi (US-European) wealthy elite. Most had embarked on their graduate studies and academic careers only after strategically marrying older, wealthier Ashkenazi husbands. Jointly with their moneyed parents, the husbands happily financed the first 20 years of their careers. If one is to add up Mizrahim (Jews of Asian and North-African origins) with Palestinian citizens of Israel, the majority of Israeli citizens are of Arab descent. If so, why does Israeli academe bestow the professorial privilege only to a handful of Ashkenazi ladies?

COMMENTARY

Academe in Israel

All Israeli universities are public. One ought to assume that a public institution reflects the citizenry who finances it with its tax money. Presently branding the widest relative income gap between rich and poor worldwide, most of these taxpayers, Arab Jews and non-Jews by default, dwell around what the collapsing Israeli welfare system defines as “the poverty line.” Nevertheless, the rank and file of Israeli tenured professors consists almost fully of upper middle-class Ashkenazi men. All of Israel’s anthropology professors but one, Haim Hazan, are Ashkenazim. The Palestinian-Israeli Majd al-Haj, started as an anthropologist, but got his tenure as a demographer. In the last decade, even Hazan was distanced from his anthropology home department.

Most of Israel’s public colleges are in the economically depressed periphery. Not surprisingly, more women are on the faculty in these colleges, where the majority of students are Mizrahi, and research budgets might arrive one day in Santa Claus’ bag of kudos. Still, in all colleges there are less than a handful of junior Mizrahi faculty women—and only one senior, who is yet to become a professor—none of whom is an anthropologist.

The common argument deployed to explain such exclusivity along rancinated ethnic lines is that Mizrahim and Palestinians just can’t climb up to the high standards of the Israeli academic industry. It is also surprising, though, that Palestinian-Israelis and Mizrahim lucky enough to win scholarships for PhD programs in the US and Western Europe’s Ivy League universities do secure tenures in high-threshold Western academic sites. Or like the late Iraqi anthropologist Abner Cohen, the only non-Ashkenazi funded by Manchester’s anthropology department to work on a PhD with the legendary Max Gluckman, just to be disinherited back home to tenure track at any Israeli university like the rest of his cohort was. Yet it is Cohen who ended up with an endowed chair at the School of Oriental and African Studies. But still, the Israeli aristocracy of academic enlightenment uses its Byzantine, highly secretive decision making mechanisms of hiring, merit and promotion to reject Mizrahim and Palestinians on the grounds of “collegial incompatibility.”

Multiculturalism

From the mid 1990s on, top US and Western European universities, both public and private, implemented multicultural recruitment programs. These came about to accommodate the critique that affirmative action faculty recruitment practices were about the fact only the racified minorities’ upper middle classes. No such multicultural recruitment strategies exist in Israel. Enrollment in non-applied PhD programs is still the privilege of the Ashkenazi upper-middle class. The Mizrahi or Palestinian woman who is lucky enough to be admitted to graduate school usually chooses an applied academic vocation that can accommodate her maternal-domestic duties. She knows that even with a PhD scholarship, she is doomed to fail the exams scripted for her by the gatekeepers of the Via Dolorosa leading to an Israeli professorship. She reaches such a conclusion when searching, in vein, for a senior woman-of-color role model. Or when exploring her own bank account, just to discover that it’s almost empty. So even with a PhD in hand, what would lie ahead?

Even if the Mizrahi woman scholar survives the non-applied PhD process, her tenure-track job application goes straight to the circular file. Mirroring the Ashkenazi elite, and composed only of tenured professors, the Israeli academic senate is still a good ol’ nostalgic battleground of chummy grantsmanship and colossal citation wars. Yet, like other Ashkenazi upper-class liberals, its members could not but notice the first feminist wave of “equal rights.” So they agreed to let in a handful of women as long as these resembled their wives: upper-middle-class Ashkenazi simulating either the de-Semitized middle-class Jewish woman or the liberal faculty club, dark masculinities were perhaps conceived as a bigger threat to the peace than dark femininities, in Israel the hiring practice is the opposite. There are way more Mizrahi men than women among the junior faculty. Perhaps Mizrahi male colleagues present a lesser risk to the peace in faculty feuds in Israel. They have already met them during their army service. When saving their lives in combat, they became brothers, indeed.

The Palestinian PhD candidate or recipient is way beyond the pale, unless the recruitment of a Palestinian-Israeli junior faculty might aid the senior lofty leftie Ashkenazi professor in getting an article published in a prestigious progressive and oft-quoted English language periodical whose editorial board is fashionably critical of Israel. alas, but the critical Zionist professor can’t utilize the PhD Mizrahi woman as a pawn to promote his liberal cosmopolitan career. Devoid of indigenous charm for the Western scholarly community, she just re-
minds the local Ashkenazi faculty of their sassy maid (before Filippi-纳斯 became the cost-effective choice). So unlike the Palestinian, no one, left or right, initiates any politically-correct harangue flagel-lation rituals for her.

Endowments
In the US and Canada, public or private universities and colleges have instituted junior and senior faculty career development funds and massive secretarial help for large-scale extra-mural grant applicatios. These endowments are meant for those who didn’t arrive into academe already equipped with the time and money required for networking into the non-applied disciplines. In Israel, where the body of academe is still ana-chronistically defined in the white masculine, the working assumption is that such special funds are not needed to help pay the mortgage in addition to paying for humanities and social science research expens-es. Most top Western universities have special mortgage programs and excellent benefit packages to compensate the mavericks who chose to specialize in low-paying liberal arts fields that are not high-end professional “vocations.” In Israel, however, the academic ad-ministrators’ working assumption is that if you choose such fields, you must have rich parents pay for it.

If the Mizrahi woman is lucky enough to win a tenure-track posi-tion, she depends on the research moneys dispensed by the buddies from the faculty club. If they reimburse her for such research expens-es, she first must spend them out of her own pocket. Only then would she get reimbursed, at least after a month. The reimbursement will often be in the form of adding it to the salary, which would thus be-come temporarily bigger and there-fore taxed more heavily. A portion of the out-of-pocket expenses she has incurred will thus be paid back to the state as taxes. Deploying such monetary shenanigans, the university actually forces her to give it an interest-free loan, and the state fur-ther benefits from taxation. There are no regulations or norms in Israel obligating the recipients of research funds to any forms of reflective public accountability. No schedule Cs either. Always she is bereft of the cash necessary for a canny accountant.

The Publish-or-Perish Game
To spicke up Israeli academe, Mizrahi women scholars are invited to teach a course here, a course there, yet, with such part-time income, they can’t pay their end-of-the-month utility bills. In order to get tenure one must publish—a lot. But a Mizrahi must invest all of her cre-ative energy in teaching rather than in writing up her ticket to tenure. So she falls behind the normative time. Furthermore, Mizrahi women are often excluded from the aca-demic publish-or-perish game because they are single moms or sim-ply single or married to a lower middle-class Mizrahi like themselves. They have not inherited real es-ates, since the university requires that they come from non-Western patriarchal structures. These critical periods coincide with a woman’s childbearing years. These are the years that require her high capability to trade off time and money for an academ-ic career, unless she wins sabbatical scholarships that include childcare, and a hubby willing to relocate, so that she can sit and write. Furthermore, she needs to win the lottery just to buy scholarly translator serv-ices, since the university requires that she publish in English. These are the years when her class affilia-tion (swap “class” with “race” here) works against her career aspirations. The lucky 8.8% of women who manage to arrive at the finishing line of Israeli academe can testify that when judging the conserva-tivism of Israeli universities, we can’t separate the gender question from racinated ethnicity and the size of the familial bank account.

Smadar Lavie (sinia5@netvision.net.il) received her doctorate in anthropology from the U of California at Davis (1989), and her associate professorship in anthro-pology and critical theory from the U of California at Davis (1994). In 1999, she had to return home to Israel for fami-ly reasons. Since then, because of “collegial incompatibility,” she’s mainly a welfare mama. A version of this commentary appeared in Hebrew in Yedio’t Aharonot.

Correspondence
Professor of Pediatrics Emeritus at Duke University and was, along with Nobel Laureate John F Enders, the developer of measles virus vac-cines that are used throughout the world today. These vaccines have, according to the World Health Organization, reduced an annual measles mortality of 8 million children to ≤ 800,000 in 2002. Efforts continue to extend the benefits of these vaccines to all children globally. In this regard, the referendum before you is especially significant as it responds directly to the false claims made in Darkness in El Don-do that the Edmonton B measles vaccine initiated and spread an epi-demic. In truth it did not, nor has it ever in its history of use from 1963-1975 and nearly 20 million child recipients.

Of equal importance, this refer-endum focuses on the extreme dan-gers of publishing false claims about vaccines. The progress noted above in control and eventual elim-ination of measles would be seri-ously threatened by false rumors that would arouse parental anxiety and reduce vaccine acceptance. Vaccine safety as well as efficacy is one of the two prime concerns of agencies such as our Food and Drug Administration that licenses such products. Evaluation of vaccines is critically important but must be done with scientific reliability. Reck-less disparagement, as was perper-t-rated with Darkness in El Dorado, is egregious and inexcusable, especial-ly when fostered by scientifically capable individuals who should know better. The referendum that you are considering reflects major issues, which impact on human life and well being, especially in the de-veloping world. If I can provide any further information, please feel free to contact me. Meanwhile, I do hope sincerely that my comments will be helpful to you in your decision.

Samuel L Katz, MD
Duke U