

Academic Apartheid in Israel and the LillyWhite Feminism of the Upper Middle Class

Smadar Lavie

In Israel of 1999, only 8.8% of the full professor's rank were women. So exhorted the high-brow *Haaretz* Weekly Magazine (26 December 2001) (1). In the manner typical of the Israeli Left's harangue flagellation rituals, the journalist who brought this scoop to the readers' attention neglects to mention one crucial detail: These 8.8% full-professors are all members of the Israeli Ashkenazi (U.S.-European) wealthy elite. Most had strategically married a husband who happily financed the crucial periods of their academic careers. When the tenure process was over, a few even dared to divorce. Why is there such a racinated, class-based apartheid among women who dwell in the halls of academe? Whatever has happened to the notions of colorblind excellence or to feminist sisterhood? Why does Israeli academe bestows the professorial privilege only to a handful of Ashkenzi ladies?

All Israeli universities are public. One ought to assume that a public institution reflects the citizenry who finances it with its tax money. Half of Israeli citizens are women. If one is to add up the Mizrahim (Jews of Asian and North-African origins) with the Palestinian-Israelis, the majority of Israeli citizens these days is of Arab origins. Brandishing the widest relative income gap between rich and poor worldwide, most of these tax-payers dwell around what the collapsing Israeli welfare system define as "the poverty line." Nevertheless, the rank and file of both full and associate professors in Israel consists almost fully of upper middle-class Ashkenazi men. The common argument deployed to explain this chummy, country-club exclusivity is that Mizrahim and Palestinians just can't climb up to the high standards of the Israeli academic threshold. How surprising, though, that Palestinian-Israelis and Mizrahim who enroll in PhD programs of U.S. and Western Europe's ivy league universities do succeed in becoming tenured professors in high-threshold sites such as Oxford, NYU, Michigan-Ann-Arbor, or the Free University of Berlin, to name just a few. But still, the Israeli aristocracy of academic enlightenment uses its Byzantine secretive decision making mechanisms of hiring, merit and promotion to reject them on the uppity grounds of "collegial incompatibility."

The ultimate examination of the lay taxpayers' reflection in academe is through their representation in the fully non-applied departments. As my crumpled grandma defines such preoccupations, "you don't get outta there with 'a vocation'," -- a monthly paycheck with benefits paid by the private or public professional sector. Philosophy, History, Cultural Anthropology, Comparative Literature, Political Science, Mathematics, Art History, Theoretical Elementary Particle Physics, and all that jazz of impractical explorations into germinal knowledge cannot translate itself into free market employment possibilities. On the BA level, some of these departments function as an efficient matchmaker for well-bred girls. But on the level of PhD studies and beyond, these departments are the prime think-tank of Israel's intellectual elite -- those who can afford the serenity of refuge found in the focused concerns of academic life devoid of practical financial considerations. From the mid 1990s on, top U.S. and Western European universities, both public and private, implemented multi-cultural recruitment programs. These came about to accommodate the critique that affirmative action faculty recruitment practices were able to attract only the racialized minorities' upper middle class. Aligning itself to this public critique, faculty of non-applied Letters and Science departments went on forays into ghettos and barrios, seducing the brightest high-school graduates to enroll. They offered these recruits generous packages of

scholarships, grants, and other forms of financial aid that were to lead to tenure-track positions, and later, all the way to full professorships.

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 get 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 to be 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, she is not likely to be invited to apply for a tenure-track position. The traditional academic senate used to be a closed club. Its members wanted to hang around with folks who mirrored their own selves. Those nostalgic chummy bonds, you know. The good ol’ gentleman’s code of colossal citation wars. Since most of them were of the liberal variety, they could not but notice the first feminist wave of “equal rights” discourse. So they agreed to let into their faculty club a handful of women as long as these women resembled their wives: upper middle class Ashkenazis simulating either the Barbies who clerked for their IDF elite units, or the manicured charity aunties who decorate their secluded neighborhoods.

It is interesting to note that Western academic hiring practices moved on to integrate second-wave feminist discourse, which focused on the intersection of gender and race. Lower middle class women-of-color thus joined the faculty club. Perhaps dark masculinities were conceived as a bigger threat to the peace of the White liberal faculty club, males and females alike. In Israel, the hiring practice is just the opposite. There are way more Mizrahi men than women among the junior faculty. The senior faculty positions are almost completely Ashkenazi. Perhaps the Mizrahi male colleague presents a lesser threat to the peace in the faculty feuds. They have already met him during their army service. When saving their lives in combat, he was a brother, indeed. The Palestinian PhD candidate or recipient is way beyond the pale. Unless feeble gestures as for the need for Palestinian-Israeli junior faculty recruitment might aid the lofty Leftie Ashkenazi professor in getting an article published in a prestigious progressive and oft-quoted English language periodical. For sure, this might advance his or her (post?)Zionist career.

No one initiates such politically-correct harangue flagellation rituals for the PhD Mizrahi woman. Devoid of indigenous charm, she reminds the buddies in the faculty club of their sassy maid (before Filipinas became the cost-effective choice). To spice up the department they invite her to teach – a course here, a course there – yet she can’t pay with such part-time income her end-of-month utility bills. In order to get tenure one must publish. A lot. But she invests all of her creative energy in teaching rather than in writing up her ticket to tenure. So she falls behind the normative time. At any rate, that gal who looks like the IDF Barbie has already been offered the tenure-track position, simply because she and/or her old fogies and/or her hubby had the time and money to weave themselves into the buddy support system of the faculty club. Now she is using their network not only for self-advancement, but also to protect herself from being red-flagged with “collegial incompatibility.” But of course, their biographies always already overlap.

Public or private institutions who care for the reflection of the citizens' body in their faculty composition have instituted junior and senior faculty career development funds and massive secretarial help for large-scale extra-mural grant applications. 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, the body of academe is still anachronistically defined in the White masculine (i.e., Ashkenazi). The working assumption is that such a body does not need special funds to help pay the mortgage in addition to paying for his research expenses. Most top Western universities have special mortgage program and excellent benefit packages to compensate the mavericks who chose to specialize in low-paying Letters and Science fields that are not high-end professional "vocations." They, too, ought to afford reasonable housing and extra-curriculars for the kids, just like surgeons, high-tech executives, MBAs, attorneys and their ilk. In Israel, however, the academic administrators' working assumption is that if you choose the sublime naval gazing of Philosophy or Linear Algebra, you must have rich parents who pay for it. If you don't, go moonlighting in the second-rate college system (at any rate, it's your wife who hires the care for your home and kids). You will have with what to pay the bills, but you won't have any time left to publish, so you perish. Or hold your students hostage by organizing a long-term senior faculty strike to milk the finance ministry for s'mores. And if a woman, just ask your husband to pay.

The Mizrahi woman is excluded from the academic publish-or-perish game because she is a single mom or simply single or married to a lower middle-class Mizrahi like herself. She wasn't married into wealth or inherited real estate from her grand-daddy or was a trust fund babe or simply used up a portion of her parents' savings. So she has no money to pay for what is needed to purchase the babysitter time necessary to write for scientific publications. Given that Israeli academic promotion is measured by English publications, she doesn't have the cash necessary to buy editor and translator's time. Moreover, she can't even contemplate buying additional babysitter time so that she can fly to present her research at international conferences, the prime location to hobnob with those who might publish the revised and expanded conference papers.

The ones who succeed in juggling all of the above usually put into use their hubbies' wealth. In Israel, a woman's salary, married or single, is always considered "a second income," and thus amounts to only 60% of the one a man gets for doing exactly the same. In the introduction to her tenure book or during the interview for the style section, done by the suave journalist, who oh so admires her on how "she made it," she will always carefully remember to thank the "supportive and understanding husband." She will forget to express gratitude to the team of Mizrahi and foreign women who relieve her of her childcare and household duties so that she will have the time to develop her career. Most of her salary is spent on these anonymous low-paid women-of-color.

If she's lucky enough to win a tenure-track position, she depends on the research moneys dispensed by the buddies from the faculty club, who love to dispense first and foremost to themselves and then to their lookalikes. And even if they reimburse her for research expenses, she first has to spend them out of her own pocket, and only then get reimbursed at least after a month, at times in the form of a bigger salary just to be taxed. Deploying such monetary shenanigans, the university actually forces her to give it an interest-free loan. Moreover, out of it, the state is able to collect more taxes. There are no regulations or norms in Israel obligating the recipients of research funds to any forms of reflective public accountability.

Most of Israel's public colleges are stuck in the boondocks. Not surprisingly, more women are on the faculty over there. The majority of students are Mizrahi, and research budgets only arrive in Santa Clause's bag of kuddos. Yet there are hardly any Mizrahi women even among the junior faculty of these colleges. The answer to this absence is also embedded in the ethnic-gendered composition of the elite that constitutes the body of the colleges' senior faculty. They always prefer to chum up with the woman from within their familiar domestic scene rather than form egalitarian work relations with the woman from without.

The critical years during which one ought to publish in order to strike permanent roots in academe are those between graduation and tenure, and then those between tenure and full professorship. Israel is an immigrant society, pressing women to breed, particularly if they come from non-Western patriarchal structures. These critical periods coincide with a woman's child-bearing years. These are therefore the years that require her high capability to trade off time and money for an academic career, unless she wins sabbatical scholarships that include childcare, and a hubby willing to relocate for them, so that she can sit and write. These are the years when her class affiliation (in Israel, swap "class" with "ethnicity") works against her career aspirations. Haaretz argues that "the Israeli academy, seemingly enlightened, is conservative," and thus blocks the advancement of women into full-professorships. The lucky 8.8% who manage to arrive at the finishing line can testify that when judging the conservatism of Israeli universities, we can't separate the gender question from that of ethnic belonging and the size of the familial bank account.

1 Ariyeh Caspi, "Search for the Woman." *Haaretz Weekly Magazine*, 26 December 2001, p. 12. In Hebrew.

Smadar Lavie received her doctorate in Anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley (1989), and her associate professorship in Anthropology and Critical Theory from the University of California at Davis (1994). In 1999, when her time was up for full professorship, she returned back home to Israel due to a grave trauma of her son. Since then, due to "collegial incompatibility" (oh well, she specializes in the gendered performance of coloniality and race in the Middle East) she's now mainly a welfare mama. Her first book, *The Poetics of Military Occupation* (University of California Press, 1990), is an academic bestseller. She is also co-editor of *Creativity/Anthropology* (Cornell UP, 1993), and of another academic bestseller, *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* (Duke UP, 1996). Contrary to Israeli academic "incompatibility" rumors, she hereby declares that she has never sued the University of California. Rather, she wishes to express her heartfelt gratitude to it for the generous financial and intellectual support she has received from it throughout her career, without which, nothing of the above would have been possible, since she's only half-Ashkenazi, and not from the elite. This article was originally submitted to *Haaretz Weekly Magazine* as a response to Caspi's. The editor rejected it due to "length" and "lack of readership's interest."

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Here are s'more thoughts about the grim state of Mizrahi women in Israeli academe. Before you open the Maariv link, some errata (the reporter got a bit confused with the professorial pecking order):
Lavie got her PhD from U.C. Berkeley in 1989. Her graduate school education was almost fully funded (tuition, room & board, books and research/travel expenses) by UCB itself, and NOT by the Hebrew university. She got a "teken" (FTE) as junior faculty from U.C. Davis in 1990. She got tenure (kvi`ut") as a mid-level associate professor at UCD in 1994. Her full-prof. evaluations were to start in Fall 1998. She was to receive it in June 1999, but instead, had to flee with her son to Israel in February 1999,

Her buddies from Sapir called yesterday to remind her that Tzahor's memory might be a bit confused as well. They were five part-timers sharing the same tiny office: Moshe Negbi (then Maariv's legal correspondent), Dr. Eli Avraham, Rani Blair (TV producer of Saturdays and Holidays), Ms. Gabi Jonas, and Smadar. There were only 3 desks in that office. Smadar and Rani shared the same little desk. Smadar never got a computer. From her paltry salary she had to finance the establishment of the Cultural Study Program she was hired to chair. Car maintenance?! That was beyond the pale...

Oh, and since she got the job at Beit Berl, her Havtahat Hakhnasa has shrunk to 2,195 NIS only.