Looking ahead: Educated Bedouin women redefining identity and belonging

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of Bedouin women in the Negev of southern Israel who choose to acquire higher education. In recognizing the potential that education holds for their community, these women choose to pursue it even in the face of personal sacrifice, simultaneously using and contesting internal gendered distinctions to promote their goals. Their pursuit of higher education, which counters gender-related cultural norms and expectations, engenders a process by which Bedouin women question their identity and belonging—a process that ultimately results in the production of alternative, often resistant, narratives. As they look ahead, these women's marginality becomes their power.

Prologue

> "The harder it is for them to move, the more they become movement itself"(Tamar Geter, renowned Israeli painter, quoted in interview with Dalia Karpel, "A damaged marionette," *Musaf Ha'aretz,* April 3, 2009, p. 60 [Hebrew]).

Yasmin gave birth in the summer of 2002, thus bringing to an end two years she chose to spend away from a husband she did not love. Spending those two years at her parents' house guaranteed her university graduation. She had strongly resisted becoming a mother before, but now realized the power that lay therein. Giving birth to a daughter made it even a sweeter challenge: her daughter was not going to be (as she told me before) all Bedouin daughters are, anybody's problem, and instead would be her source of pride. It was through her motherhood—the opposite of what her husband and his mother wanted out of this pregnancy—that the path she had been vigorously carving for numerous years was beginning to concretize. When the time finally came to return to work, at the end of her maternity leave, she knew she was not the same woman anymore. On her first day back at the office, where employees are both Jewish and Bedouin, she posted a sign on the wall asking all of her colleagues to use a new name she chose for herself. Those who knew her well enough realized that the new name she chose reflected all she ever wanted, both in the act itself and in the specific chosen name. The motherhood she so feared before was that of the stereotypical ideal Bedouin mother, but once she became one, she realized she could never be that mother and that her motherhood could only be an extension of the woman she herself had become.

Opening up

The year 1988 marked the admittance of the first Bedouin woman to Ben Gurion University of the Negev (BGU). Emerging out of the forgotten spaces that the state has created for the Bedouin community, stepping outside of familiar cultural spaces in which demands and expectations of women continue to be anchored in "traditional" patriarchy, educated Bedouin women have come to question the Bedouin women's "slot" (to borrow from Trouillot, 1991) in their cultural community. In recognizing the potential that education holds for their community, these women choose to pursue it even in the face of personal sacrifice, simultaneously using and contesting internal gendered distinctions to promote their goals. Thus, the marginal space from which these women operate becomes the source of their motivation and their power, and their individual struggles to get to campus are struggles of women who are aware of their potential power as mothers, daughters, sisters and cousins in designing the future of their community. By looking ahead, these women gather the strength to turn their marginal position into a powerful one. And as the margins become a conscious space, made powerful by women's "interpretive labour" (Graeber, 2006),[1] the center appears unaware of the "gaps" that intensive modernization processes have brought about. Focused on maintaining the "traditional" status quo, the center is in many ways oblivious to the openings that these "gaps" are creating for these women and the various ways in which women's use of these openings inevitably permeate daily life in the community.

The multiple struggles of educated Bedouin women in the Negev was the topic of my master's thesis (Halevy, 2002), for which I conducted fieldwork in several Bedouin towns and villages and on the BGU campus between 2000 and 2002. Data was gathered using three methodological tools: interviews/conversations with educated women and their families and friends, questionnaires handed out by some of the women I met with often, and participant observation.[2]

Returning to these materials seven years later to write these pages, I found a wealth of publications on the topic of educated Bedouin women in the Negev that I did not anticipate, and needless to say was not available during the time I was writing.[3] However, as the number of Bedouin women on campus did not rise in proportion with the rise in publications,[4] I see the contribution of this paper in its careful treatment of common assumptions of education as (unproblematically) empowering. By shedding light on the special spaces, subversive and creative, that the very existence of education opens up in such extreme margins, this paper traces the ways in which such spaces become the ground from which social change is generated, even as their very position as educated women remains widely questioned by a cultural "center" (men and elders in general) that seems to possess a very limited understanding of the potential extent of the educated women's uses of these spaces.

In the following pages I wish to tell the story of these women through the narrative of Yasmin. Though she is only one of many women I met with during my fieldwork, with her the spark was immediate, and being about the same age, thus moving through life's stages at similar times, we have since been sharing our experiences of self, marriage and motherhood. Yasmin belongs to one of the largest tribes in the Negev and comes from a family including several respected sheikhs. She grew up in a Bedouin town and is the oldest daughter (the second child) in a family of 10 siblings. When I met Yasmin, she was 23 and just beginning the long period she would end up spending at her parents' home, after leaving her husband at the end of one year of marriage because, contrary to his earlier promises, he was becoming an obstacle to her studies. Being her first cousin, they were destined to marry from the day they were born. While she grew up in the town, excelled in school and dreamed of going to university, her husband grew up outside the town, stopped attending school at a young age and worked in a local factory. I chose to use the story of a single woman, knowing that many of the issues that came up regularly in my conversations with other women are present in her story. While examples can be endless, the power of a coherent narrative, which allows us to follow a person over time, should not be underestimated.[5] From the many women I met during my fieldwork, Yasmin's ability to verbalize her experiences as she relayed them to me was unique. Her desire to remain faithful to herself in the midst of constant and intensive pressures from her parents and husband exposed me, in our conversations as well as my visits to her home, to the complicated (and often painful) dialogue between her and her family and community.

Immersed in fieldwork, Yasmin's story exposed me to a confusing "mix" of suffering and inexorable ambition that I soon realized was a defining thread in the tenuous experiences of contemporary educated Bedouin women. This essay is located where the two meet, where the tension between them becomes a productive force. In turning to higher education, Bedouin women begin a process of questioning their identity and belonging, of stripping "labels of obviousness" from various components of "Bedouin-ness"[6] upon which they have been brought up—a process which ultimately results in producing alternative, often resistant, narratives, potentially opening up new physical spaces to maneuver within as well as wider spaces for expression. These spaces, physical as well as mental, move beyond those that are available to non-educated Bedouin women, and they are dangerous precisely because of the tensions that their availability produces.

As Yasmin guided me through her cultural world, I was impressed by the suffering and despair that filled her life and at the same time by her unbridled ambition. What motivated such ambition? What does education mean to Yasmin and other young Bedouin women who consequently respond to two sets of expectations, values, ways of "being in the world"? In what ways does such education redefine their positioning in these multiple worlds, and how does it shape their new sense of self in their present and future?

In tracing the daily experiences of educated Bedouin women in the Negev, the following pages proceed from a description of the peripheral location of the Bedouin community within the State of Israel, and that of the triply marginalized position of the women within the community, to the prism of post-colonial studies. The latter allows for an analysis that looks beyond familiar dichotomies of West/East, subject/object, thus pushing us further towards understanding the daily experiences of educated Bedouin women as ones that cross "borders," producing hybrid identities. In that "crossing," which goes against gender-related cultural norms and expectations, simultaneously emphasizing their "otherness" within the state, their marginality becomes their power. As the very choice and decision of educated Bedouin women to continue their education beyond what is considered "culturally appropriate" already questions that which is locally perceived as "natural" and "given," their actions must be perceived as agentive and further understood within the frame of "creative resistance." Even as education continues to be treated with ambivalence within their community, and their direct involvement in it is often resented, their participation in that "border zone" persists: questioning, negotiating, redefining their identity and belonging, thus inserting their voice into local narratives.

"If they are local, then who are we?": (Hi)story(ies)

Proclaiming itself to be Jewish and democratic, the State of Israel places the "Jewish" component above that of the "democratic," a fact evident in the obviously different relationships the state forges with its Jewish and Arab citizens. Zionist ideology places local Palestinian populations as the "others" of the Jewish state (Kimmerling, 1983; Ram, 1999; Yiftachel, 1999). The central question therefore remains: "who is a Jew" instead of "who is an Israeli" (Bishara, 1993:204). Much less attention is given to the specificities of cultural communities and to their particular relationship with the state. The Bedouin community of the Negev, while part of the Palestinian minority that Rabinowitz (1993) refers to as "a trapped minority,"[7] occupies a distinctly separate and peripheral geographical space. From the early days of the state, it has been perceived and treated as (culturally) different, as another "other," as part of the state's general scheme to separate and control its minority populations, emphasizing cultural differences while subduing national sentiments. In other words, the Bedouin community experiences a double erasure: as Palestinians, their nationality is transferred into the realm of “cultural” difference, and as Bedouins, they are physically and administratively separated from the rest of the Palestinian community. In the narrow space they are allocated by the state, they are expected to be the Bedouins that the state desires them to be: tribal (and thus, unrelated to land) and non-Palestinian. Within this extremely marginal community, in an ongoing process of forced modernization and a consequent deepening of “Arabization” and “Islamicization” (Dinero, 2004), Bedouin women come to be triply marginalized.

The Negev Bedouins represent the farthest socioeconomic end of the state. The community consists of numerous indigenous tribes that were once semi-nomadic and have long been at odds with one another. The community is Muslim in religious orientation, with a well-defined value system characterized by strict gender and ethnic segregation. They are the only group that has been transferred en masse to a different area than the one they resided in prior to 1948. They remain unique in their inferior status, as the state communicates with them through mediating institutions that were set up precisely for this purpose and that act without coordination with other state institutions. It is estimated that 170,000 Bedouins reside in the Negev, and yet available estimates range between 160,000 and 200,000. These gaps in estimates should alone serve as evidence of their extreme marginality. The Bedouins make up one quarter of the Negev population, with about half living in seven townships that the state has established for them, seeking to limit their use of land and modernize them in the process, and the other half living in about 50 villages, a fifth of which were “recognized” in 2004.[8] At a birth rate of 5.5%, among the highest in the world, their population doubles every 13 years. About 30% of the men and 80% of the women are unemployed, so that at any given point of time, a total of 55% of the adults in the community are out of the work force, contributing to a situation in which about half of all Bedouin families live below the poverty line. More than 50% of the women are illiterate. Sixty percent of all Bedouins are under the age of 18 (Swirski and Hasson, 2006).

In 1948, at the close of the War of Independence (for the Jews) or the Nakba (for the Palestinians), only about 10,000 of an estimated 60,000 Bedouins remained in the Negev (Ben David, 1996). The new Israeli state relocated the remaining Bedouins, and concentrated them in a much smaller and less fertile area called “the Siyag Area,” where they remained between 1948 and 1966 under military rule. In this manner, the state attempted to erase any prior land divisions, in addition to restricting the ability of the Bedouins to lead the life they had known. Since the Bedouins had, for various reasons, never managed to register their lands legally, the act of relocating and concentrating the community was not perceived as illegal by the new state, and vast areas of land were confiscated. This strategy ensured that the more fertile land was saved for Jewish settlements, while control over the Bedouin population was made easier and more efficient.

For almost four decades, a forced and fragmented modernization has been imposed on the Bedouins, a process which has been directed by Jewish administrators with very little consideration of local needs, customs and lifestyle. When the military rule ended in 1966, the Bedouins were placed under the control of the Israel Lands Authority (ILA), established in 1960, which is responsible for the management of land ownership across the state. In 1986, the Bedouin Authority was established, and has since become the main governmental body charged with responsibility for everything affecting the Bedouins. Over the years, this authority has aroused much criticism, from Bedouins as well as human rights organizations. That the Bedouins exist in a political and legal bubble is clear.

Bedouin women have suffered the most from the move into towns. As a direct result of a state-imposed change in lifestyle, Bedouin men and women had to abandon their traditional roles, as the balance between private and public spaces changed and rows of cement houses on one-dunam plots replaced groups of tents in spacious hills and valleys. In accordance with traditional Bedouin codes of behavior, now restricted to much smaller spaces, the life of Bedouin women in the State of Israel gradually stripped off the “traditional” bases of their vitality, turning them from producers to consumers (Fenster 1999) and making their traditional tasks irrelevant to their new lifestyle (Tal, 1993). Only men were permitted to leave the Bedouin space (home, village, town) to work, while the women could only stay behind. The mothers of most of the students I met never went to school; these students are becoming a first generation of literate mothers.[9] Out of this reality Bedouin women emerge onto campus: cognizant of the corner into which their community is being pushed by the state, and of the consequent pressures this puts on their community and specifically on them as women. Beyond being marginalized citizens, these women experience further marginalization within their community and have to surmount the daily contradictions between the education that is offered to them by the state and the obstacles that their community puts in the way of their desire to partake in this education.

“It is because of culture that we go, not thanks to it:” Post-colonial educational ambiguities

Yasmin grew up having everything she needed, and recalled how spoiled she and her sisters were as children. She also recalled when it all changed:

> The only thing my family knew about my future was who I was going to marry. All I had to do was be born for that to be settled. The one thing I knew about my future was that I wanted to go to university, to be educated, and I realized that at some point those two plans will clash.

> I spent four years at university, and still my word means nothing at home. This is how it is in our society: it seems supportive, but it really is cruel. Every woman has to take care of herself. You cannot fear your surroundings, fear people's talk. You have to believe in the good, in the decisions that you make, and to stick to them. That honor is what causes our society to remain stuck is a given to me, but it is "honor" as men and elders see it. I believe that I also have an idea of what honor means, and I know I am an honorable woman. But this is the education we receive: to never feel comfortable, to stay out of everything, not to mention emotions, to live and never ask "why."

Yasmin foresaw the clash. Even though the physical structure of her school was located within the town, the distance that she was walking to school throughout her childhood did not reflect the real distance that she was feeling—as a result of this exposure, and of the future options it ostensibly opened—between the woman she wanted to become and the one her family expected her to be. Maturing into a woman, the tension deepened. She loved her parents and knew they loved her, but they wanted opposite things for her. While marrying her cousin was something she was willing to do for her parents, not going to university was not.[10] Thus, while her parents perceived the personal dimension of her life (marriage, children) as more important, guided by those same "traditional" values and norms which they were seeking to preserve, Yasmin perceived her personal advancement (education, career) as more crucial to struggle for. She believed that personal sacrifices made in the present would supply the tools with which to redefine that very "tradition" in the future: moving the community towards understanding that education alone does not take away one's "Bedouin-ness" and allowing Bedouin women to acquire education without having to "give up" their honor.

The education that the state is legally obligated to offer its young Bedouin citizens is the same education that the community feels morally obligated to take away from these same citizens once puberty is reached and the girl becomes a woman. Once a woman, tension deepens between the rights she is entitled to as a citizen and the cultural role she is expected to fill. Contributing greatly to this tension is the general alienation felt by the Bedouin community with respect to the education that is designed for them by the Jewish state. It is not that the Bedouin community is against education per se, but that it fears the setting in which education is given and its potential to affect women's values. What the community tends to take at face value seems to be taken much further by the women when they look ahead, beyond the quality of education in the present, beyond the fact of the state's intervention, instead concentrating on keeping open those doors that have been opened. From their years in school and on to university, education becomes a definitive component in who these women are, in the goals they set in life, in their plans for marriage and motherhood, in the future they imagine for their community and in the part they wish to take in that future. But all this comes in sharp contrast with the ambivalent feelings that the Bedouin community still has towards their education in the problematic context of the Israeli state.

The argument in this essay joins the post-colonial story in exploring particular stories of women in multiply marginalized positions, positioned on the boundary of several hegemonies. Even as margins and borders come to the forefront of analysis, the gendered aspects in the lives of marginal women is not given sufficient consideration. Beyond the risk of homogenizing the varied experiences of post-colonial societies around the world, post-colonial theory carries the risk of homogenizing the experiences of women in a particular location with that of the men. The fact that, in order to proceed with their plans, women in marginal locations often have to overcome obstacles put forward by men in their very own families and communities should tell us that the stories about their experiences will have to differ from the men's, and that precisely these internal restrictions have the potential to serve as the basis for their agentive actions. It is within these restrictions, within the limited spaces that are culturally allocated to them, that an unexpected independence flourishes, springing from the very seeds of men's obliviousness and expediency. These women cannot and do not simply break all the rules, but instead remain highly aware of, and work within, the limits of their position, thus becoming integral and creative local agents of change, working towards creating a local future that cannot avoid their vision. It can be argued that their relation to their cultural community is one of "looking ahead," and that in the very act of challenging cultural gendered orders, their borderliness becomes the ground for social change.

Educated women tend to perceive men as weak and obedient to cultural norms, within a cultural community that inherently perceives women in this way. This perception originates in men's reluctance to deviate from the normative due to their chances to benefit from the very structure that restricts the women. This is the same structure that locates the education of women on the non-honorable side, at the same time that it ignores quite non-honorable behaviors that the men are involved in about which everybody knows (men who have girlfriends in addition to wives, or men who hire the services of prostitutes in Beer Sheva, among other complaints). Bedouin women must learn that scarcity of choice teaches well thought-out decisions. The women have to fight hard and strong for that which comes easily to men, and they delve into education as a door to alternatives, where, they often claim, men just want the diploma. Education becomes the common denominator these women were lacking when their identity (in the eyes of others) was solely defined according to tribal origin, and as such, they unite around the individual and communal possibilities that education holds. They see themselves as integral participants in the design of the future of their community. Yet, as women, they have to make their actions seem minute, unimportant and hence "safe" (Macleod, 1991).

The space to which the stories of educated Bedouin women expose us highlights the multiple and unexpected ways in which the political, economic and cultural come together in the life of women in marginal places. Moving beyond classic anthropological paradigms that perceive the globe as divided between discrete units with an absolute fit between culture/place/identity, post-colonial theory, extending from Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, allows us to inquire beyond familiar dichotomies (West/East, developed/undeveloped, subject/object) that split the globe neatly into First/Third worlds. It opens a new space for questions regarding processes of identity formation that inevitably impact feelings of belonging. Moreover, post-colonial theory offers various forms for treating First/Third World relations within the colonial context, by being carefully tuned to "the mutually constitutive role played by colonizer and colonized in shaping the identities of both the dominant power and those at the receiving end of imperial and colonial projects" (Kandiyoti, 2002:279). The dialogical nature of identity and belonging thus becomes appropriately emphasized (Taylor, 1994). Through the hyphen between "post" and "colonial," it aspires to describe colonialism's myriad material effects and the extraordinary variety of responses to colonialism across the world. In the life of Yasmin, generational differences in perceptions of education can be taken to reflect such variety in responses. In the context of the Israeli state, the education that the community receives is different in its setting (schools are gender-mixed) and content than it would have been had the Bedouins been involved in its design. Parents' continued ambivalence towards education in general, and for girls in particular, is thus part and parcel of their "invisibility" in the eyes of state institutions and the resultant value they attach to family and community in contrast to the individualism that processes of education aim to encourage.

In order to understand the experience of educated Bedouin women, the focus must become one of "in-between," a zone not here nor there, a "border zone" (Anzaldua, 1987) or a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994), in which individuals present multiple, not binary, subjectivities and belongings and, as "subjects" rather than "objects," are perceived as being conscious of hegemonic narratives, and hence are potentially agentive. The "border," a concept that post-colonial writings have put at the forefront, becomes the kind of space that post-colonial ambivalences produce, a zone of colonial encounter where radical inequality and conflict thrive. "Border zones," argues Anzaldua (1987), are sites of double meaning: both a territory on the globe where people belonging to different cultures live, and a site in the soul that brings together different cultural elements within one individual, thus creating spaces in which possibilities for hybrid identities are opened—spaces of removal, where difference is inherent, where it is impossible to feel at home. In this space, the "zones" beyond the "border" meet, clash and produce new creations (Rosaldo, 1989), becoming important margins (Spivak, 1995) that allow muted voices to be heard.

"Paradoxically," Hall writes, "marginality has become a powerful space. It is a space of weak power, but it is a space of power, nonetheless…" (1997:34). Looking beyond the head cover that is often tied tightly around the face, and the dress that usually goes all the way down to the shoes, educated Bedouin women cross "borders" on a daily basis: from young women who were educated on the knees of tradition, they rise and become bravely engaged in actions that extend much beyond the ongoing pragmatic cultural consensus, actions that not long ago were solely in the realm of the imagination. Bedouin women who choose the path of higher education emerge, often for the very first time on their own, from a distinctly Bedouin space into a Jewish/Israeli one, already quite critical of their (cultural) home. In contrast to most other decisions affecting their lives, the decision to attain higher education is their own and often one that does not reflect the will of their families. Clearly the university is a border zone for these women, and “borders” have to be crossed on their way to campus: in being geographically and symbolically removed from their “home,” the campus is designed for the Jewish majority, operating according to much more liberal codes than the women are used to, and their engagement in these spaces far beyond the “normative” in their community turns them into “borderline” women. On campus, these women are simultaneously invisible due to their small numbers and quite noticeable due to their distinct style of dress and the fact that they tend to be seen in clusters. Concomitant with the “question mark” they describe as imprinted on their forehead, the hem of the dress is lowered: the margins can become productive only when the center feels itself (relatively) secured.

But should it? Educated Bedouin women would claim it shouldn’t, even though the reality of most Bedouin women still proves otherwise. Indeed, “traditional” Bedouin norms and institutions have been undergoing gradual erosion since the establishment of the State of Israel, and Bedouin men can now exert less control over women in their immediate/extended family. What men may perceive as the “cultural core” at stake, epitomized by the growing freedom of movement of (educated) women, the women perceive as deepening cracks, as opportunities to question what men (and elders in general) have and continue to present to them as “natural.”

While also critical of the narratives she is exposed to on campus, Yasmin is aware of the added aptitude her education and its related “crossings” grant her in further understanding her own culture. She thus continually expresses her opinion, an act filled with content which together insert the world she is exposed to on campus into her home and family. Yet, locally accepted codes of behavior continue to design, and consequently limit, such expressions. Thus, in persuading a man (father/husband), her words would be uttered neither in public nor with the self-confidence such words might be communicated to a woman. If she considers the issue important enough, she will be gently consistent until the issue is resolved as she sees fit. She is aware of every such incident in which a decision is affected and an act redirected. But the men, she says, are unaware, and think that the game continues to be played strictly according to their rules.

In love with someone from another tribe, Yasmin’s sister was destined to marry Yasmin’s husband’s brother. She did not love him, and he simply followed the orders of older men in his family. Prior to their wedding, the brother lived at Yasmin and her husband’s house for almost a year. Slowly but surely, she convinced the brother that he does not wish for himself the same life his brother has: marriage to a woman who does not love him only because the decision was already made (by others). She did not forget her own father and gradually "worked on him too." She convinced him that he has a chance to do good by not repeating the same mistake twice. She succeeded.

In this transition, the position of women as ostensibly less powerful in their day-to-day life creates a situation in which women become more conscious of the winding roads of cultural norms and expectations than men, making them better equipped to fuel a cultural change. Having nothing to lose, and perceiving most Bedouin men as (obliviously) obligated to cultural norms, women "carry the torch."[11]

In my conversations with Yasmin I learned how calculated her decisions were, and how conscious she was of it. This was one of the central differences she saw between the manner in which she lives her life, even as she is in constant need of justifying her actions, and the lives that men live, when all the options are essentially open to them, but they choose not to look ahead and act exactly as expected by the community and its elders. She, on the other hand, will struggle to graduate even though it might cost her her marriage. She will convince her father not to let her sister marry without love like she was forced to, and she will ignore her husband for over a month because he tried to convince her father otherwise. She will also take a young, recently widowed woman to the bank and post office because women should learn to do these things on their own, and she knows that this woman will then take her children and they will learn, too.

The compromises that educated Bedouin women make are for the sake of the collective, even as these women continue to grasp the collective as unappreciative of their efforts and achievements. This is reflected in Abu-Rabia-Queder's recent title, *Excluded and Loved* (2008), which takes us back to the tension we began with: where ambition and suffering meet and become a productive force that will have to, they have to believe, bear fruit in the future. Local cultural resentment towards women who acquire higher education continues to fuel, as well as justify, the need for education within their community, highlighting a felt need on their part for a cultural reorganization. Trespassing "traditional" (b)orders in being on campus and wanting to acquire higher education is the first step in that reorganization, a step that the women themselves *decide* to take (and yet one that would not be possible without the support of a specific male individual).

"I'd rather have a question mark on my forehead": Resistance and subjectivity

"There was nothing to talk about. When the moment came, the decision was made, and I took no part in it. This was my time to be sacrificed on the altar of tradition." Yasmin explained her strategy to me,

> The issue was not who I will marry, but to keep that entire issue away from me. A husband would be an obstacle to my plans. I worked from the moment I graduated from high school as a secretary in that same school so as to maintain a busy committed profile. Only after I was accepted to university did I marry him. But he is stupid, and though he promised me he would let me continue with my studies, he gave me a hard time. I tried to stay. The alternatives were very few: I could stay, and I could go back to my parents only to be sent back to him. If not him, then no one else, my parents said. He wanted to get me pregnant. [Yasmin laughs.] He thought that if I got pregnant, I would forget about university, and that would take these "crazy ideas" out of my head. So, I secretly went to a doctor and took birth control pills. When a year passed, and I didn't get pregnant, he threw me out. I stayed at my parents for more than two years. I did not want to go back, but I knew I would once I graduated. I hoped he would not want me back, and that others would come. But you cannot put your trust in Bedouin men because they are weak and have neither the sense nor the strength to go against tradition. You have to be strong for yourself, and you accumulate this strength, because without it nothing is possible.

Here, Yasmin proceeds from the cultural tension that surrounds the education of Bedouin women in the context of the Israeli state to concrete agentive actions that such tension engenders among Bedouin women, having to maintain a careful balance between "sacrificing for tradition" and designing a contemporary "Bedouin-ness" to which they will feel they are able to belong.

Western feminist discourses have been heavily criticized for assuming that the very fact of belonging to a single gender should produce similar experiences. However, the experience of being a woman remains incomplete unless we take into consideration the concrete context in which she lives. It is for this reason that Kandiyoti (1996:17) argues that grand feminist narratives tend to hinder the production of more context dependent, micro-level exploration of local institutions and cultural processes which are critical for the production of gender hierarchies. If we are cognizant of the Orientalist tendency, which assumes that Islam can only produce a limited version of feminism, if at all (Motzafi-Haller, 2000), then "cataloguing" educated Bedouin women's "feminism" matters less than emphasizing the struggles of these women to improve their own life circumstances and to fight restrictions based on gender, while being conscious of their marginal position and of the potential that this marginality holds within when coupled with experiences of education.[12]

When Yasmin told me she “had a question mark on [her] forehead,” she hastened to explain that this is the image she has in the eyes of her community, that her desire to acquire higher education, to go beyond what the community has taught her she may want, puts her honor in doubt. But there was another side to this image: beyond the everyday reality of traversing home and campus and the communal gossip that this sparks, this question mark has become part of the way she sees herself, marking the multiple tensions she has been struggling with regarding her identity and belonging as woman/Bedouin/Israeli.

From an early age, these women describe feeling a deepening gap between educated and non-educated Bedouins, between their own generation and that of their parents, between girls who fight to graduate from school and those who submit to familial pressures and quit, thus becoming the “Bedouin woman” their community expects them all to be. In a conversation with Al Baz in 2001,[13] he described this gap, saying: “The girl that got up in the morning and went to school experiences a change which is not experienced by those left behind at home. In her parents’ eyes she becomes a rebel, but in her own eyes she is greatly deprived.” The educated Bedouin women I met in the Negev “have their hearts full.” When I first heard one of them describe another in this way, I thought it was her wording, but I soon came to realize the commonality of this phrase. The women I met with repeatedly claimed,

> Education is in order to have a life. But you have to be disillusioned in order to study. You ask “why” once, then many times over, and you end up on campus. It is because of “culture” that we go, not thanks to it. We go to break it apart.

This is because—contrary to most Bedouin men, including educated ones, who appear to say “yes” to material changes (cars, satellites, stone houses) but “no” to structural ones (education for women, marriage outside one’s tribe)—educated Bedouin women realize that the two cannot be separated, believing that “structures” can change without collapsing, that “Bedouin-ness” should be grounded in the past, yet attuned to the present. Education remains, in their eyes, an absolute “right” and a justified cause even if (or, precisely because) it means that “you have a question mark on your forehead.”

Since Scott’s (1985) *Weapons of the Weak*, acts of resistance have been studied as located within a context of struggles over values and their meaning. In this way, (agentive) practices of resistance become “the cultural construction of power’s other side(s)”, thereby marking power’s location(s) (Ortner, 1999:139). Under this new spotlight, the site of culture itself, especially in post-colonial societies, comes to be perceived as one filled with political conflicts and thus with practices of resistance.

Within such a daily struggle, there can only be short term, de facto goals. Resistance itself, claim Gupta and Ferguson, becomes an experience that constructs and reconstructs subjective identities (1997:17), itself the direct effect of the ambivalence produced by the process of becoming conscious of hegemonic discourses (Bhabha, 1994).

In struggling to attend university, Bedouin women present us with the sort of resistance that aspires towards the creative rather than the reactionary (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1995:76). They aim not to undo "Bedouin-ness" altogether, but instead to take part in designing the future of their community, in reweaving the "traditional" into their daily life in ways that would make them "feel at home" with their cultural community, so that the very fact of their belonging would not be conditioned upon their blind adherence to normative codes of behavior of which they are already critical. As the values and norms to which they are exposed outside of Bedouin spaces permeate, thus intertwining with those of their cultural community, they come to resent definition on either side of the "border." They contemplate their experiences of "Bedouin-ness," stretched uncomfortably between feelings of attachment to their cultural community and the continuous toll that these attachments take on their personal desires.

In post-colonial spaces, identities "cannot enter the perimeters of the existing discourse" to the point of feeling a "discomfort from the actual frame of the discourse itself" (Motzafi-Haller, 2002). Identity thus becomes a particular combination of "a name" and "an experience" that together define it as well as its borders (Jenkins, 1994). It can no longer be defined in relation to two dichotomous poles, that of (The) "truth" and that of "invention," as it is always simultaneously an "imagined" and a "real" phenomenon (Hever, Shenhav and Motzafi-Haller, 2002). In this continuous process of formation within parallel weaves of inclusion and exclusion, individuals gain what Bhabha (1994) calls a "double vision," within a space of hybridity, of in-between, which becomes a "space of/for subjectivities."

It is thus that the very location of hybrid identities grants them a subversive potential in a conflicted and contradictory reality, one which practices of resistance uncover. Such practices offer us, even if in fragmented ways, alternative narratives to collective memory, and, in the shape and form they take, they further teach us of local loci of power and of the (resultant) cultural gendered possibilities for agentive action. Hence, agency, argues Greenhouse (1996), should always be put in its cultural context, as this is the context in which it grew and with which it converses. According to Bedouin norms, the interests of Bedouin women should conform to those of the extended family/tribe, and their desire for education seems to challenge those very norms, because it originates in what "I" want and what "I" decide.

With a bachelor's degree in hand, and two years older, Yasmin (a new one, because "the old Yasmin is dead") went back to her husband. Soon thereafter she became pregnant. She felt completely disconnected from the baby that was growing inside of her and expressed a deep concern that she would never be able to love it. However, leaving emotions aside, she relentlessly acted: by the time she gave birth, a hole had been made in the living room, a staircase downstairs had been built, and a separate space within the house had been created, according to her wishes ("American," she called it). Here she welcomed visitors who came to congratulate her, not her husband. The non-traditional name she gave her daughter was soon followed by a new name she chose for herself—a name she knew would not be adopted by her family, but would be embraced at work.

As educated Bedouin women gradually become conscious of the hegemonic narratives that frame their lives (national Israeli, and patriarchal Bedouin), they begin to play creatively with what they have. As they perceive men as weak, perhaps too comfortable in the position they have in their community, they gather strength from knowing that they are the ones who know better to cope with the winding roads of their tradition (asking too many "why's"). When Bedouin women make a conscious choice to acquire higher education, that very choice is already located beyond the possibilities that lie "naturally" within Bedouin cultural "borders"; thus, their choice resists these very "borders." Knowing that her family would attempt to marry her off right after she graduated from high school, Yasmin reached an agreement with her school principal that she would work as a secretary for two years, thus postponing the marriage until the age of 20 (before which one cannot apply to the university program in social work). This allowed her to return to school on a daily basis, where the principal was present should the pressure from her family to marry escalate. The action of educated Bedouin women is characterized by foreseeing the responses of one's family and community and carving one's path accordingly. Though the paths they travel are individual, the struggles only their own to manage, they share a goal that is beyond their individualities, beyond the concrete every day. Education becomes a door to alternatives and a tool of empowerment—not so much due to its quality, or even to their achievements, but because the very fact of it being there makes the option of "crossing" (exiting, desiring, criticizing) a reachable reality—allowing Bedouin women to redefine and reconstruct their subjectivities and belongings.

It is thus that Yasmin believes she did two things at once: graduated and stayed put. Paradoxically, the option of escape did not automatically bring to her mind her own freedom, but instead the tougher restrictions (posed mainly by males and elderly women in the family) that such a move would entail for her sisters and cousins. This is the kind of familial/communal responsibility that characterizes these women's choice of an education: that the bus that leaves the village in the morning will be fuller than yesterday, that with every academic year the number of women students will rise. They may have lost on some of the fronts in their own individual battles (by marrying without love, marrying as a second wife, or remaining single), but the shared look ahead is what allows hope to permeate.

Conclusion

Five years later and a third growing belly. Yasmin is still in the same office, but now working in kindergartens with children and women instead of “just” with women:

> I changed positions because it made me too sad. What can I really do for these women?[14] I can’t really change anything in their life because the tools we have just don’t work for them. I look at my work with children as the other side of the same coin: working with them is in some sense working with their mothers, but more than anything else, it is work done towards the future.

It is in this context that we should think of educated Bedouin women: only by looking ahead can they perform in the present. In this look ahead, although the future may remain quite vague, it is clear to them that they want to contribute to its design and that such a contribution would not be possible while remaining in the “slot” of the “ideal” “traditional” woman, without participating in the “modern” state and thinking/experiencing one’s identity not only in tribal terms, but also in civic ones. This is the thread that connects their stories and struggles, that fuels their motivation.

However inseparable the two cultural worlds which educated Bedouin women traverse may be, these women experience two cultural worldviews on a daily basis—one on which they were brought up, the other as a result of university, each tending to negate/contradict/omit the other. This often leaves them feeling outside of both cultural circles and thus becoming each other’s circle. Differing greatly in the details of their individual experiences, they keep moving in similar trajectories, looking ahead. Their voices portray a process which challenges, questions and recreates the experience of being a Bedouin woman in Israel, adding a new dimension to the local mosaic.

The title of my masters thesis ended up being “Walking the thin line: The multiple struggles of educated Bedouin women in the Negev.” In it, the essence of what I have learned from these women was encapsulated: that they possess a critical awareness of the role that their individual trajectories play in setting the terms for others to follow. Precisely because they are so aware of the circumstances in which they are operating, a flexible and strategic use of several discourses characterizes each one of their complex stories of crossing and redefining “borders.” The fact that the “line” is “thin” does not hinder their walking.

NOTES

[1] In a lecture given at the London School of Economics, titled "Beyond power/knowledge: An exploration of the relation of power, ignorance, and stupidity," Graeber makes a link between structural violence and the knowledge that those against which the violence is directed possess. He calls that knowledge "interpretive labour" or "imaginative identification": "…the fact that within relations of domination, it is generally the subordinates who are effectively relegated the work of understanding how the social relations in question really work" (2006:8).

[2] Speaking of these women as pioneers, I made an important distinction in my thesis which is not discussed here: that not all Bedouin women who attend university are indeed looking ahead and willing to pay a price for the benefit of their community, but instead use the door that others have opened simply in order to exit the "traditional" space of the Bedouin woman.

[3] Many works on the topic of higher education among Bedouin women in the Negev have been published in recent years, in addition to work on Druze women and on Palestinian women in general. Abu-Rabia-Queder has published extensively on the subject (for a comprehensive example, see Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2008); see also Erdreich (2006), Givati-Teerling (2007), Pessate-Schubert (2004, 2005), Weiner-Levy (2006) and numerous reports published by the Center for Bedouin Society at BGU specifically concerned with Bedouin women's higher education.

[4] In 1995, five Bedouin females were enrolled in BGU, a number which rose to approximately 250 in 2006. There are currently 112 Bedouin women with a bachelor's degree. These numbers, however, are taken from a report published by the Center for Bedouin Society at BGU (Abu Asbah, Karakra and Arar, 2007), which focused on female Bedouin students who did not graduate, working from a list given by the university of 44 drop outs, which add up to almost a fifth of the total number of women students.

[5] The life (hi)story approach in anthropology, and in the social sciences in general, has long been practiced as well as debated. Its attempt to tie the native voice, the community that this voice is taken to shed light on, and the ethnographer's imperative to insert this narrative into a wider theoretical context indeed has the potential to leave a trail of gaps in its wake. And yet, writes Behar, the life history narrative "should allow one to see the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system that is often obscured in a typified account" (1990:225).

[6] This is not a term that the women or the Bedouins tend to use, but one that I find useful in reflecting the variety of lifestyles and perceptions of the "traditional" among the Bedouins in the Negev. In other words, and in line with Cole's (2003) "Where have the Bedouin gone?", I see the importance of this term in the space it

opens for negotiations between, and struggles over, subjective definitions of belonging and identity.

[7] Arab citizens of Israel, Bedouins included, tend to be simultaneously perceived as “collaborators” in the eyes of the Arab world surrounding the Jewish state, and hostile in the eyes of the state to which they belong.

[8] I keep “recognized” in quotation marks throughout this paper so as to convey the idea that, more than anything else, these acts of “recognition” are more political and administrative acts on paper than anything else and, unfortunately, have not been translated into action.

[9] The Israeli Ministry of Education essentially runs two parallel educational systems: Jewish and Arab, with Jewish decision makers for both. In the Negev, however, though the educational system was active since 1954, it can be argued that compulsory education was only implemented among the Bedouins from 1967, with the establishment of Tel Sheva, the first of seven townships. Yet, the problems which characterized schooling in its inception persist: makeshift infrastructure, lack of physical structures, materials and local educated teachers, and the great distance—physical, but also conceptual—between home and school (Ben David, 1994).

[10] For studies supporting this very point, see Abu-Rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy (2008) and Weiner-Levy (2008).

[11] While writing these pages, on April 4, 2009, a first instance of terrorism by a Bedouin resident of the Negev took place. The attacker was a young woman, a high achieving student in grade 12 from Hura (one of the seven townships established for the community by the state) and a member of the same family as the head of Hura’s governing council. The attack was foiled, and she was immediately shot to death. Among her belongings, her family—completely in the dark with regard to the girl’s feelings and plans—found a diary in which she expressed deep frustration and immense anger at the war in Gaza (both in writing as well as in sketches of herself as a *shahid*), which ended not long before her own action. Beyond the obvious light that this instance sheds on the general frustrations experienced by the Bedouin community as a minority within the Jewish state, and their familial as well as symbolic relations with the Arab population across the state, including Gaza and the West Bank, the fact that a woman stood behind this action where no local man had ventured before, is, I believe, tied to the general claims that this I wish to make in this paper.

[12] Many of the women I spoke with claimed that their knowledge of the Koran was far greater than that of the men, and that they therefore knew much more (than men tend to think they do) about the existing gap between the rights accorded to women in the Koran and the reality in which they are living. At one of our meetings, Yasmin asked me not to offer her anything to eat or drink, as she needed to complete a few days of fasting from last year’s Ramadan, because women are not allowed to fast during menstruation. By making sure to complete these days, Yasmin expressed

her knowledge of her duties as a Muslim woman, and her ability as well as desire to fulfill her religious obligations without the interference of others, without their watchful eye, thus supporting the claim that women do not need men in order to be “honorable.” In addition, describing the immense pain she experienced when the decision was made for her to marry her cousin, she made explicit the fact that the Koran grants women the right to refuse marriage and that the woman should always be asked. Men prefer to skip this stage, as it tends to “complicate the process,” she said. Polygamy was also an issue that came up repeatedly in talks with the educated Bedouin women. A man can marry more than one woman only if he treats them equally, and since such equal treatment is perceived as impossible, these women repeatedly said that men should not marry more than one woman. It is important to note that educated men, as well as men who are committed to promoting local women’s matters, can also be found to have more than one wife.

[13] Until 2004, Al Baz was head of Social Welfare Services for Segev Shalom and all of the unrecognized villages. Beginning in 2004, he became head of Social Welfare Services at Abu Basma, which is a special (region-less) regional council established in 2004 as the result of the state’s decision to “recognize” some 10 villages out of about 50 and which continues to serve the entire population living in all of the villages yet to be granted “recognition.”

[14] Here, Yasmin specifically refers to Bedouin women whose cases she was in charge of, who are in dire need of various forms of assistance and often belong to more traditional families with tighter restrictions over women. This makes them even harder-to-serve clients, as the solutions the state offers are culturally inappropriate for them.

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