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women in Israel: race, gender and citizenship

Nahla Abdo, Zed Books, London and New York, 2011, 240pp., ISBN: 978-1-84813-954-1, £18.99 (Pbk); ISBN: 978-1848139558, £70.00 (Hbk)

Throughout the pages of *Women in Israel: Race, Gender and Citizenship* Nahla Abdo engages in a critical gender analysis of citizenship in Israel, compelling readers to consider the relations of power that underwrite knowledge production, feminism, and the lived realities of women and men in Palestine-Israel. Focusing largely on women's 'economic citizenship' while situating the Israeli state within a settler-colonial paradigm, Abdo deftly elucidates the complex historical and contemporary processes through which gender, race and class converge in differential enfranchisement. Methodologically and theoretically innovative, Abdo's political economy approach fuses intellectual rigour with feminist activism in the pursuit of 'a wider space for challenging the present and envisioning a future without existing forms of oppression' (p. 19).

Integrating personal experiences of activism and employment in Palestine-Israel with comparative analyses of statistical data provided by the Israeli state, Palestinian and Jewish civil society organisations and international reports, Abdo's work foregrounds political engagement in the application of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. As such, the combined basic tenets of Abdo's research set *Women in Israel* apart from existing scholarship on Palestine-Israel and prevailing approaches to women's citizenship in the Middle East. Entering into debates with clarity and assurance, Abdo convincingly argues that solely ethnic-centred paradigms provide insufficient explanation for Israeli citizenship policies and practices of the state (p. 18); analytical frameworks attentive to gender, race and class in Israel must encompass Palestinian, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi populations (p. 40); and appraisals of women's citizenship should be neither entirely state-centric nor prioritise the role of cultural factors over material conditions (pp. 25, 48). From these premises, Abdo embarks upon a 'militant ethnography' inclusive of anti-racist and anti-colonial feminist methodologies, as she places herself within the movements that inform the aims of her book (p. 51). Drawing upon her long-term activism with Palestinian women's and civil society organisations in Palestine-Israel, Abdo's account of race, gender and citizenship thus remains rooted in political and material realities as it seeks their very transformation.

In appraising differential citizenship in Israel, Abdo primarily trains her focus upon Palestinian women, importantly disaggregating this category as she

seeks comparison with the conditions experienced by their Mizrahi and Ashkenazi counterparts. Rather than working within the bounds of prevailing ethnic citizenship paradigms, throughout her work Abdo demonstrates the significance of race to the extension and realisation of citizenship rights, rejecting and politicising the ways in which exclusively 'ethnic' approaches elide the racism central to Israeli settler-colonialism. Thus, standing in contrast to official statistics, such as those offered by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and studies undertaken by researchers at Israeli universities, Abdo remains attentive to the multiplicity present within the category 'Palestinian citizens of Israel' as she investigates processes, practices and policies of marginalisation. As such, her careful quantitative analyses make reference to the diverse experiences and positions of Muslim, Christian, Druze and Bedouin women and men. This attentiveness to the tensions between totality and specificity pervades *Women in Israel*, as through her multi-layered analysis Abdo stresses both interrelation and differentiation. Regarding Jewish Mizrahi citizens as also 'Arab'—thus subject to contradictory processes of racialised exclusion and ethnicised inclusion—and insisting upon the centrality of marginalisation to domination, Abdo's analyses of the 'whole' are strengthened by her consistent consideration of its parts. Similarly, in adopting a historical materialist approach, Abdo rejects sweeping culturalist arguments—which cite patriarchal culture, religion and the family as the sources of Palestinian women's oppression in Israel (pp. 104, 128)—and foregrounds institutional and structural factors, tracing the continuity and influence of colonial projects from Israel's present settler-colonial regime back through periods of British and Ottoman rule.

Uniting the compelling arguments that frame *Women in Israel* is Abdo's exploration of 'economic citizenship', which when coupled with the settler-colonial paradigm provides an 'appropriate conceptual tool for understanding the classed, racialized, ethnicized and gendered nature of Israeli citizenship' (p. 19). Unfolding largely in Chapters 3 and 4, Abdo's detailed statistical and personal accounts of Palestinian, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi labour force participation and educational provision make clear the extent to which practices and policies of inclusion and exclusion function as central aspects of Israel's political economy. Thus, underwriting the settler-colonial state are dual systems of labour and education, the former divided into 'Jewish' and 'Apartheid' markets (pp. 115–116) and the latter into 'Jewish' and 'Arab' sectors (p. 146), which reproduce and maintain existing relations of power and privilege. Importantly, the internal differentiation of these systems is illuminated by Abdo's focus on gender analysis, through which she reveals the systemic and systematic oppression of Palestinian women citizens of Israel.

Yet as Abdo renders visible the institutionalised racism, sexism and prejudice to which Palestinian women remain subject, she continually draws attention to the lived realities of Israel's Mizrahi women citizens. In doing so, Abdo emphasises

'the importance of acknowledging the historical and contemporary experiences of Mizrahi women as the condition for understanding women's citizenship in Israel' (p. 180), challenging the epistemological hierarchies that position Ashkenazi narratives as representative of all Jewish citizens of Israel. It is this sustained focus on the function of power across and within women's complex histories and material realities that characterises Abdo's analysis of citizenship throughout *Women in Israel*. Ultimately, this critical orientation resonates with the book's political project, as Abdo insists upon the presence of Palestinian and Mizrahi women in both 'the privileged space of representation' available to Ashkenazi feminists (p. 11) and the world in which they live as marginalised citizens of Israel.

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