

# Feminist Identity vs. Oriental Identity

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(Translated by Sharon Ne'eman)

Sexual identity—like national or ethnic identity—is not a personal, but a collective identity imposed upon the individual by society. The fact that I identify myself as a woman, an Israeli, a Jew, or an Oriental does not necessarily transform these identities into personal identities, despite their being integral parts of my self.

Collective identities are inherently political. Even when a person changes her or his content for herself or himself, the personal act does not personalize the collective identity; rather, the new identity negates the content of the previous identity and strives to replace it. Until the new identity succeeds in representing the entire collective, it characterizes a small and revolutionary part of it.

"Feminism" refers to a revolutionary sexual identity. Thus, in contrast to her sisters of the past, the contemporary woman has the possibility of choosing between two alternatives: She may adopt the gender identity known as "feminine," or the identity known as "feminist." The former cooperates with the oppressor; the latter rebels.

There is no other possibility. Still, it is not uncommon to hear women presenting variations on one or the other of these two gender identities, in a pathetic attempt to swim without getting wet. Women who declare that, while they are not feminists, they support equality for women, are actually stating that they are not opposed to sex inequality, but are, rather, in favor of fairy tales—will the prince rescue poor Snow White?

Other women claim that they are feminists, but at the same time, they reject political struggle on the part of women. Such women share the common misconception that gender identity is a personal matter, and that each woman can select the components she prefers. This notion implies that feminism is "something" from which one chooses what she likes. Yet gender identities are never personal, simply because no identity common to a collective is personal. A collective identity is a "whole," including interrelated behavior codes, feelings, and beliefs.



In a way, collective identities resemble territories. Pursuing the analogy, the feminist struggle is a struggle for autonomy—for the restitution of women's control over themselves, and the creation of a new code. Hence, women's movements for changes in gender identity are no different from national liberation movements. They call for a new form of self-determination, represent new interests, and demand a different political structure. Any woman who claims to oppose the revolutionary political organization of women is not a feminist. In fact, such women actually support the status quo, whether they admit it or not. They, too, are waiting for Prince Charming.

Gender identity, like national identity, serves specific interests. If women in Israeli society are discriminated against, compared to men—and Arabs, compared to Jews; and Orientals, compared to Ashkenazim—then the very acceptance of the content of these collective identities makes me an integral part of society, and, as such, a party to the perpetuation and preservation of its present form. Like other collective identities, gender identity can only be changed by the new content which women are presently injecting into the mold imposed on them from without. The introduction of new content is a political act, a protest challenging the existing order.

As a political activist for over a decade, I have been involved in many struggles. Nevertheless, although my voice rang out from numerous public platforms, I must confess that I was impressively silent on every issue concerning the situation of women in general, and in Israeli society in particular.

It is strange, since I define myself as a feminist and am no stranger to political struggle. Yet I contented myself with making new rules of behavior only within a restricted, personal circle; I never initiated any consistent action aimed at feminist change, nor did I participate in such action. In fact, I was a "personal feminist," that is, something which does not exist, except as a convenient female lie.

I will try to explain why. In so doing, I may be able to answer a much more disturbing question: why so many women take no part in the struggle; and why so many publicly prominent women are not feminists, that is, do not oppose women's oppression.

I was born female, to Jewish parents, who immigrated to Israel when I was an infant. During the first four years of my life, the following identities were imposed upon me: "feminine," "Jewish," "Israeli." A short time later, my Israeli identity was negated and replaced by an ethnic identity—a process which, in fact, was perpetrated by Israeli society on all those Jews born and raised in Moslem countries. Israel imposed the "Oriental" identity on those immigrants in order to set them apart from those citizens perceived as entitled to the "Israeli" identity, the Ashkenazi Jews; and also, to a certain degree, to set them apart from the Palestinian Arab citizens, who were entitled to almost nothing. The "Oriental" identity meant discrimination, and the "Arab" identity, even greater discrimination. The force which determined the pecking order was



“society,” that is, that sector that had a monopoly on power and social resources. “Society” was first and foremost the Ashkenazi male Jews; their women supported them wholeheartedly, whether out of love for their own privileges, or merely because they had been brought up to obey.

Obviously, I hated my “Oriental” identity. From the day I learned to tell the difference, I yearned to assume the identity of an “Israeli”; naturally, I longed to resemble its true representative, the Ashkenazi male. In this context, my womanhood was a privilege that might relieve my inferior “Oriental” status: by marrying an Ashkenazi, I could rise in class. Among many Oriental families, marriage to an Ashkenazi male was considered a formula for success, the breaking of a social barrier; as elsewhere, women were viewed as no more than mirror images of the men they had managed to “catch.” Similarly, Ashkenazi families perceived Oriental women as warm and subservient creatures, whose assumed capacity for serving Ashkenazi males compensated, to some degree, for their inferior ethnic status. A common Yiddish proverb illustrates this point: “A Frenk is a chaye; a Frenkina, a mechaye” (“an Oriental is a beast; an Oriental woman is bliss”). Reality, then, showed me that by being more feminine, I could become less “Oriental.” No doubt, at that stage, my feminine gender identity did not bother me one bit; on the contrary, I was about “to make it.”

When I finally attained “Israeli” status, however, I realized that an identity is not merely a trapping—like a first name or a veil—but an array of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings supporting the interests rooted in that identity. Thus, as an “Israeli,” I was supposed to discriminate against Arabs, Orientals, and women; to believe that such discrimination was “natural,” “vital,” or “nonexistent”; to feel that it was “all right,” or “not all right, but there’s no choice”; and to construct a logical edifice to explain why it was “essential,” or “objective,” or “not the best thing in the world, but that’s the way it is.” The most problematic aspect of this process at the time was the need to despise Orientals—to despise my parents, my grandmother, many people whom I loved—and to view them as directly responsible for their inferior status in Israeli society. After all, I was about to join the ruling class, which is never responsible for anything bad, and whose members achieve their goals by virtue of their wisdom, beauty, and energy.

By the time I could be considered “Israeli,” I had already begun to reject that dubious distinction. As Israeli society is composed of three ethnic groups (with class and ethnicity overlapping)—Ashkenazi Jews, Oriental Jews, and Palestinian Arabs—it was obvious that I and others like me would have to go on being “Orientals” for a long time, with all that this implied. Accordingly, my first challenge was to infuse new content into my “Oriental” identity, to build new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. This process included an effort to dredge up from the past various illustrious forefathers (not foremothers); to rehabilitate memories; to construct symbols; and, most important,



to understand (with a certain amount of regret) that I would have to renounce the privileges devolving on me as an Israeli Jew, even one who was also an Oriental woman.

The change in my "Oriental" identity gave me the right—a right which did not depend on the Ashkenazim—to an "Israeli" identity, even though I had come to realize that that identity, too, would have to be changed. Such a change meant imposing on Ashkenazim their own ethnic identity and negating their "Israeli" identity, in order to create an identity with room for Arabs and Jews, Orientals and Ashkenazim alike. The process would be both individual and collective. Without individual effort, I could not change my own inner ethnic and national identities; without a political struggle, I could not press for change in the collective identities and the interests they served. At that point, I consciously stopped using my femaleness as a ploy to make life easier for myself. I began to demand rights, rather than beg for favors; and the first thing I looked for was comrades-in-arms.

I had all kinds of odd partners—chauvinist Oriental men, antifeminist women, nationalist and liberal Ashkenazim. Each of them had his or her own reasons and interests for changing the existing "Oriental" identity. Yet, when later I went on to struggle for change in the national identity, many of my erstwhile comrades dropped out. For example, Orientals who wanted to be just as "Israeli" as the Ashkenazim were not interested in granting "Israeli" identity to Palestinian Arab citizens; nationalist Ashkenazim who deigned to admit the Orientals into "their" identity refused to concede that Palestinian Arabs could also be unreservedly "Israeli." Even liberal Ashkenazim, who were prepared to incorporate Palestinian Arabs into the national identity, had difficulty confronting their own "Ashkenazi" identity, as this would have necessitated changing the content of that identity and renouncing the interests and privileges reserved for them alone. In short, it became clear that many Israelis face an internal conflict of identities—partners in any one stage of the struggle were liable to disappear en route to the next.

With women, too, my experience of support was brief—but instructive. The great majority of Israeli feminists are Ashkenazi. In the few opportunities I had to meet with them, I noted that they called for the liberation of women from male oppression, but refused to fight discrimination against Orientals or Arabs, whether because they saw no oppression (in the case of discrimination against Orientals by Ashkenazim), or for tactical reasons (in the case of discrimination against Arabs by Jews). The scarcity of Oriental and Arab women among their meager ranks admittedly bothered them; yet, they accepted it as they would a chronic eye infection. Moreover, as they could not even reach the thousands of women of their own ethnic and class affiliation, they felt no need or impulse to contend with their "Ashkenazi" identity and its privileges. The Oriental struggle was alien to them.

Basically, their approach was no different from that of the Oriental and Palestinian movements. Orientals argued that for tactical reasons, it was not



prudent to come out against male oppression of women, since the Oriental struggle for liberation was still in its infancy and could not (yet) open another front and risk losing supporters. To the best of my knowledge, this hesitancy also characterizes Palestinian revolutionary movements. As the great majority of my comrades in the Oriental movement were men, this approach—if and when it ever reached the point of discussion—was adopted without objection.

Fighting oppression is not poetry. Rather than fine distinctions, it requires rough outlines and crass generalizations. Its initial stages must be marked by “us” against “them”; “oppressed” against “oppressors”; “justice” against “injustice.” Only after the struggle reaches mass proportions and achieves a certain legitimacy can the social analysis take nuances into account. This being the case, who were the “us” with whom I was to struggle? With the feminists, who fought against the oppression of women, but were not prepared to fight against that of Orientals; or with the men, who opposed the oppression of Palestinian Arabs or Orientals, but were not prepared to oppose that of women? And if that wasn’t enough, the feminists’ “them” included my Oriental comrades-in-arms, and the Orientals’ “them” included Ashkenazi feminist women (not to mention that the Palestinians’ “them” quite rightly included Jews of both sexes and all ethnic origins). Members of all these groups acted both as oppressed and as oppressors. As oppressed, they were right; as oppressors, they were blind.

The lesson I learned is by no means new. Changing the oppressive content of one identity does not necessarily lead to a change in the content of another, privileged identity; and while no group likes to be oppressed, it may not really mind being oppressors. As the saying goes, the foot hurts only where the shoe pinches.

The question is not which of the oppressed groups is “more right,” or with which of them to empathize (as, from both the intellectual and the emotional standpoint, one can empathize with all oppressed collectivities without distinction), but with which group to ally oneself in the actual struggle. I chose to join the Orientals, rather than the feminists. This may have been because I considered the class element, the Orientals’ belonging to the lower class, as crucial; or because I had not yet exchanged my “feminine” identity for a “feminist” one. Nonetheless, in the process of changing my gender identity, my inability to identify with the Ashkenazi feminists, and my lack of trust in their sincerity, became an obstacle. I was not prepared to join their collective struggle. I could not ignore their refusal to fight for change in the situation of Orientals in Israeli society, although I could resign myself to the similar refusal of Orientals to oppose the oppression of women.

It would be wrong to assume from the foregoing that ethnic identity is stronger than gender identity. When collective identities are in a process of change, the transition from the stage of individual change (affecting the collective identity within myself) to that of collective change (affecting the collec-



tive identity in society) depends upon existing agents of social change. If these agents pose a problem for the individual, the process of change in the collective identity is liable to come to a halt. I am speaking of a problem that stems from basic conflict of interests, not one that originates in disagreement over tactics or misgivings over negative stigma that may attach to participants of the struggle.

The Ashkenazi feminists, and this is no less true of white feminists in the West, are an integral part of the dominant ethnic group. They are, in fact, fighting against their oppression by Ashkenazi or white men, and not by Oriental or black men; they are not married to the latter, are usually not exploited by them, and they do strive for the types of dominance that the latter cannot obtain. By contrast, the circles of oppression surrounding the Oriental and Palestinian Arab women are much wider than the space occupied by their men. Oriental and Arab men are not policy-makers and do not control the economy or the media; thus, in their wretchedness, they oppress only their own women. While the women must certainly fight against them, they must also struggle against the Ashkenazi men and women who keep Orientals and Palestinian Arabs, irrespective of sex or age, from an equal share of the resources of the society in which they live. The Ashkenazi feminists (and the white feminists of the western world), who have not stood up against their own ethnic group and class and joined the fight against its dominance, are not natural allies in the collective struggle of women from lower ethnic classes, as they do not oppose the existing social order as a whole, but only one dimension of it.

Finally, I cannot omit another, embarrassing observation. I did not protest against the oppression of women—not even Oriental women—because it was not convenient. Just as many women artists refuse to be “women’s artists,” and women in politics often refuse to deal in “women’s affairs.” Artists and politicians alike want to reach the summit, the tip of the pyramid built by men. At that summit, all things involving “women” are considered trivial; we, the women at the summit level, want to deal in “universal” matters, even though we know them to have been defined as “universal” by men. And if “women’s affairs” are not a “universal” matter and women’s art is “sectoral,” we tend to avoid dealing with or identifying with these issues. Therefore, many women in prominent positions prefer to preserve their own status in the masculine ivory tower by ignoring the condition of women. This supposed ignorance is pleasant and convenient, not to mention the fact that it enables women to remain grateful to the men whose prodigious assistance got them up there in the first place.

Furthermore, any struggle against the oppression of women threatens men and male privilege. Since the object is to strip men—especially those at the top—of power, they will fight any woman colleague who demands her due. In a very subtle way, women learn that a great deal of discomfort can be



avoided by careful phrasing and intonation. This is the soil which nurtures "personal feminists": Those women universally respected for having "made it on their own"; those women who are, "of course," in favor of women's equality, but who (even if unconsciously) always manage to turn the oppression of women into an intellectual, ethical, noncontroversial, and extremely marginal subject on the public agenda. In this way, they have the best of both worlds. If asked directly, they will express feminist attitudes; at the same time, any concrete action they take in this area will be limited and sporadic. I hate to admit it, but I've been there.

Several years ago, when I began my activity on behalf of the party [TAMI, the "Israel Tradition Movement," a short-lived Oriental party that was a member of the government coalition 1981–1984—Trans.], the party leaders asked me to organize a women's movement. I refused, because I felt they were trying to reduce my status, as if I had been asked to set up a kindergarten while they, the men, dealt with affairs of state. At a certain point, I changed my mind and agreed to meet with women at local branches, in order to recruit them for party activities. After two meetings in two development towns, I received no further invitations, because the men heading the party branches were stunned at the nature of the encounters. They had intended for me to come to the women and encourage them to "help out" in branch activities: to send letters, make telephone calls, prepare refreshments. What I had done, however, was to spur the women to act as branch managers and local party heads; I also showed them techniques for achieving a majority vote, or for finding time for political activity ("Take a baby-sitter for the kids," "Leave your husband with them," "Set up a playroom in the party offices," etc.).

At those two meetings, the male party members in attendance felt profoundly insulted. They had invited some 30 women to each meeting, and had treated me with considerable deference. As soon as we began to talk, I asked them politely to serve the refreshments, so that the women could all be present at the discussion. To help them over the shock, I even encouraged them to joke about it. Within a few minutes, however, when I realized that the very presence of men was preventing the women from speaking freely, I asked them to leave the room. Feeling that I was undermining their authority, they tried to protest or to poke fun at me. When they returned, they found the women highly critical of party activities and full of new ideas. At that point, the men could no longer conceal their rage. They had treated me as "one of their own," and I had betrayed them by challenging their status.

I was not invited to any more development towns, nor was I ever again asked to organize a women's movement. I could have tried to change the decision, to fight their tendency to put women down. I did not do so, because I wished to avoid conflicts, to be "just like a man," to deal in "important" matters, and to be appreciated by the men. It was much easier for me to forget my obligation toward the women whom I had met in the two



development towns, as I had no further contact with them, in contrast to my daily encounters with the men, during our discussions of "affairs of state."

For years, then, I tried to resolve all the above conflicts by defining myself as a "personal feminist." As I now see it, such a definition is foolishness at best, tantamount to acceptance of the status quo and, therefore, passive cooperation with the oppression of women. The commonly suggested solutions for this dilemma are the establishment of a universal movement against all forms of oppression, or joint struggle by an umbrella organization. These, unfortunately, are not real solutions: not only because they have not been effectively implemented, but also because they do not present the critical analysis necessary for any serious consideration of the problems raised.

For the sake of illustration, let us assume that I get up tomorrow morning and found a humanist movement, with a general platform opposing all oppression. What would happen? The number of people prepared to fight for overall social change and abolish all forms of oppression, including any and all of their own personal privileges, would probably not exceed two dozen. All of them would be decent people whose financial situation enabled them to be decent. After three "ideological" meetings, a dozen of them would tire of the game; when we reached the problem of financial resources, the others would also drop out. It is, of course, possible that no one would quit, and that we would remain a united group, meeting once a month for ideological discussions, funding a small newspaper, and incessantly debating the question of how to reach the masses. There are such groups in New York and Tel Aviv; they remain tiny for years. Despite the attractiveness of the idea, such groups lack the strongest motive for struggle—organization around a burning issue specifically defined by the members themselves. Yet when this occurs, the principle of "the foot hurts where the shoe pinches" and its implications are bound to narrow the perspective of the struggle once again.

Another strategy is the formation of an alliance of organizations opposing various forms of oppression, within which each movement continues to strive for its specific goals, while maintaining "strategic" contact with the other groups, cooperating in the organization of occasional mass demonstrations. This, too, is an attractive idea; in practice, however, it is nothing but an illusion. During a 3 year stay in New York, I found that this type of cooperation resulted in no more than one march per year, with many participants and colorful signs, something resembling a carnival. During the same period, I witnessed a number of vehement protests against racial incidents—protests at which, to my astonishment, whites were conspicuously absent. And in the 1989 march against changing the abortion laws in the United States, the proportion of Black and Hispanic women participants was negligible.

What basis is there for such an alliance in Israel? While intellectually opposed to the oppression of women, many Oriental political activists are chauvinists in practice; most of the Ashkenazi feminist women are against the



oppression of Orientals, only they do not really believe that Orientals are, in fact, oppressed. As for the Palestinians, they are not sure they need to devote even a moment's thought to the oppression of women or Orientals, when their own children are being shot in the streets every day. Not to mention the fact that not a few of the men are proud chauvinists.

The problem is not alliances and strategy, but old identities that act as nets of oppression, from which most people—including political activists involved in the struggle against oppression—have not managed to free themselves, if indeed they wish to free themselves.

The feminists' contribution to solving this problem should be by concentrating on critical social analysis, which is sorely lacking in feminist discussions. Their tendency to content themselves with analyzing one aspect of society—the oppression of women—obscures the obvious connection with other forms of oppression, and leaves the feminist struggle detached from, and occasionally opposed to, other liberation movements. Without a critical analysis of the society in which women live, the feminist struggle is liable to take the form of an internal elitist conflict, and thus to lose its great revolutionary potential.