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Feminine Strength: Reflections on Power and Gender in Israeli-Palestinian Culture

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Abstract

This article explores a particular discourse on women's power among Palestinians inside Israel. I present ethnographic documentation of resourceful women who are commonly referred to as qawiyyi (strong), and offer the term "feminine strength" to talk about what I see as a normative script for "proper" handling of femininity and power. I argue that feminine strength encourages women to channel their achievements back to the home, and discourages them from vying with men over public status and official prestige. Personal strength that is amenable to transformation into public, political status is primarily a male prerogative and I therefore call this type "masculine power." However, dwelling on the gap between official and embodied representations reveals a range of creative negotiations that make the local articulations of gender and power more complex than they may seem. Looking at the broader context in which femininities and masculinities are produced, I show that "feminine strength" vividly echoes some of the major concerns of Israeli Palestinians generally, notably their preoccupation with modernity, cultural morality, and collective identity. By walking a fine line between conflicting demands and possibilities, women who are called qawiyyi embody the ongoing attempts of their community to uphold a moral existence, while balancing formi-

dable constraints and new opportunities. [Key words: feminine strength, masculine power, Israeli Palestinian culture, women's power]

Questions of women's power, particularly in societies outside the core of world economy, have long intrigued feminist scholars, who assert that lack of formal power does not necessarily indicate passivity, helplessness, or disempowerment (Collier 1974, Rosaldo 1974, Wood 2000). The rich ethnographic literature produced over the past thirty years has been particularly fruitful in establishing the need to heed local classifications regarding spheres of influence and responsibility, instead of assuming the universality of western dichotomies such as domestic and public, and their presumed overlapping with female and male (Nelson 1974, Comaroff 1987, Lamphere 1997). The present paper on a discourse on strong women among the Palestinian citizens of Israel (hereafter Israeli-Palestinians) draws on this legacy. I present ethnographic documentation of several resourceful, assertive, and highly accomplished women, and the complex responses that they generate. In vernacular speech, these women are commonly referred to as *qawiyyi*, which translates, literally, as "strong," but which in fact carries more nuanced meanings that are connected to local understandings of femininity. I interpret *qawiyyi* women as embodying 'proper' handling of femininity and power, and use their case to probe local articulations of gender and power more generally. Emphatically, gender and power are resources, rather than traits, and can therefore be negotiated and practiced in diverse and creative combinations. Yet, since they are locally constructed as essential attributes, they are often *experienced* as fixed or immutable. As I show in a separate publication (Sa'ar 2004), despite restrictive moral definitions, in practical reality women often manage to push the limits of normative feminine morality and still enjoy social acceptance. However, such acceptance cannot be taken for granted, as many also face a range of potential sanctions. My analysis dwells on the space that is made possible by the gap between official and embodied representations. Offering the term "feminine strength," I argue that in their everyday experiences, Israeli-Palestinian women who seem to acquire "too much" power risk potential symbolic depletion of their femininity. This effective mechanism of maintaining gender inequalities notwithstanding, *some qawiyyi* women get away with power practices that go beyond what seems to be accepted, therefore expanding the norms of legitimate womanhood.

This section starts with my theoretical approach to gender and continues with a review of the literature on women's power in Middle Eastern societies.

It concludes with what I see as an intrinsic dilemma in feminist scholarship, whereby the insistence on debunking binary terminology may sometimes thwart a full-fledged discussion of male domination and gender inequalities. In my analysis of feminine strength, I have found it imperative to use seemingly “frozen” terminology, in order to dwell on the complex of limitations and possibilities that inhere in the informal power of women. More specifically, I offer the terms “feminine strength” and “masculine power” as heuristic tools (*not* as descriptive tropes) for deciphering the dynamics of gender and power in one particular cultural group. Despite the essentialist ring of such terms, the ethnography is dedicated to showing both feminine/masculine and power/strength as stopping points on dynamic continua.

Gender and Power, a Theoretical Overview

Gender

I use the term gender as a classification of personal types (“being a woman/a man” as a matter of personal identity) that is embedded in structures of power (family, community, state, etc.), which themselves have gender as one of their organizing principles. For example, being a woman entails being a wife, a mother, or a daughter; conversely, being a town notable entails and feeds back on being a man. Accordingly, the analysis is based on the understanding that to a significant degree personal gender identities derive from positions within power structures. However, because gender identity inheres in the body and, more than other identity components that are also embodied, becomes likened to it (in the eye of the beholder “woman” is identical to “female body”), its structural source is easily blurred. This will underpin my argument that changing one’s position in respect of the structure of power may be *experienced* as changing one’s gender (i.e., as becoming less feminine).

Two insightful theoretical elaborations of this approach to gender are the works of Robert W. Connell (1990, 1996) and Chantal Mouffe (1992). Connell defines gender as a “body-reflexive practice,” and masculinity and femininity as gender projects (as opposed to stable entities). His emphasis on process facilitates our understanding of the historical components of gender constructs on both the personal and the collective-political level. It also provides room to understand the role of agency in production, reproduction, and change in the gender/power dynamic. Also writing within the anti-essentialist current, Mouffe likewise views personal identities as multiple and shifting,

which means that in principle people cannot be reduced to “men” or “women.” Yet she does not disregard the political implications of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as empirical collective categories. She enables us to consider both the historicity of gender and the power of its seemingly natural presence. For Mouffe, social agents are articulations of ensembles of subject positions that correspond to the multiplicity of social relations in which they are inscribed. “Every subject position is constituted within an essentially unstable discursive structure since it is submitted to a variety of articulatory practices that constantly subvert and transform it. This is why there is no subject position whose links with others are definitively assured and, therefore, no social identity that would be fully and permanently acquired” (1992: 373). “Women” and “men” cannot be understood as definable empirical categories with a common essence and identity. Moreover, women or men are never fully and consistently dominant or subordinate. Mouffe neither argues for the obliteration of sexual difference nor denies that “men” and “women” constitute politically significant collective subjects. The latter, however, comes about *not* through an alleged internal essence that binds people as “men” and “women.” Rather, these are statuses that result from partial fixation of identities, through the creation of nodal points within dynamic and contradictory webs of subject positions.

To tie all this to my characterization of gender identity as positional, I would go a step farther than Mouffe, and add that as long as it is constructed through multiple forms of power relations, the category “woman” implies subordination, and that of ‘man,’ domination. As will be demonstrated below, Israeli-Palestinian women who are constructed as ‘strong’ operate in a cultural environment that is emphatically male dominated. The ways in which they handle their impressive personal potential respond to cultural imperatives regarding proper gender conduct, which in turn evolve within larger power structures, such as a nation-state and a class system that marginalize and subordinate their community.

Informal Power

The question of women’s power occupies center stage in feminist anthropology of the Middle East. As part of a broader call to acknowledge the agency and subjectivity of women in marginalized societies, ethnographers of the region have emphasized the calculated, strategizing character of women’s behavior, and regarded them as rational agents who strive to determine their own and other people’s actions (Davis-Schaefer 1983, Hoodfar 1996, Kandiyoti

1988, Lewando-Hundt 1984, Michael 1997, Nelson 1974). Similarly, in a move to break away from simplistic equations between gender segregation and women's disempowerment, studies have shown that strict compliance with the code of feminine morality through veiling (Abu-Lughod 1997, Mule and Barthel 1992), shyness (Abu-Lughod 1986) or sexual indifference (Wasserfall 1998) yields honor, which in turn women may use in their moral competition with men. Put differently, Middle Eastern women, like women in other marginalized regions, are not powerless, as they may seem to outside observers. But their power is mostly informal.

Commonly, ethnographic analyses of women's power (Gilmore 1990, Lamphere 1974, Rosaldo 1974) draw on Max Weber's classic concept of power, which centers on the ability of actors "to realize their own will in a communal action, even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action" (Gerth and Wright Mills, 1958:180). Beside the emphasis on the ability to impose one's will, Weber's legacy also provides the highly pertinent distinction between a legitimate right to command obedience and the actual ability to secure favorable decisions. The first, which is usually classified under the term "authority," implies positive actions and duties, as well as a clear hierarchy. The second indicates influence, which is not necessarily officially sanctioned, although it too is regulated through social norms. This aspect is central to feminist analyses, as it articulates the manipulative potential of women's informal power, and directs attention to their agency, subjectivity, and subtle ability to affect others. Such interpretations have been immensely valuable in turning on its head the traditional vision of domination as a top-down, unilinear process. In this respect, a second major theoretical source in feminist analyses is the work of Michel Foucault (e.g., 1978), who represented power as exercised, decentralized, and productive, rather than possessed, vertical, and repressive. Regardless of the glaring gender blindness that characterizes his work (Deveaux 1994), Foucault's focus on how subjects are actually constituted through power relations has been used extensively by feminist scholars (Sawicki 1991). His emphasis on the relational character of power relationships and their dependence on a multiplicity of points of resistance inspired the production of complex accounts of women's lives under patriarchy, which attempted to present their subversive strategies alongside their subordination.

Domestic Power

Since informal power, particularly in the case of women, is so heavily invested in the domestic domain, it is habitually referred to as domestic power. This

term is metaphorical rather than descriptive. If anything, it expresses the elasticity of the “separate spheres” rather than their bounded nature. In the Middle East as elsewhere, women’s actions, roles, and positions are culturally constructed as domestic, but their influence reaches well beyond the home. It has significant bearings on “big” issues, such as the economy (Mohanty 1999, Walby 1986), formal politics (Phillips 1994, Singerman 1996), or citizenship (Pateman 1988, Yuval-Davis and Werbner 1999). In Middle Eastern societies the family plays a central part as a provider of emotional support, social identity, economic resources, and political connections, and also as an idiom for social relationships (Giacaman, Jad, and Johnson 2001, Joseph 1996, 1999, Joseph and Slymovics 2001, Singerman and Hoodfar 1996). These characteristics place it in continuity with “public” areas of social life rather than in opposition to them (Joseph 1997).

The persistent centrality of the family, despite economic and technological changes that have generated great variations in lifestyles, and indeed in marriage and domestic patterns, reflects its intricate embedding in the economy, the state, local communities, and civil society. A direct implication of this is that women confront patriarchy in practically all spheres of life. However, the particular positioning of these domains with respect to one another is dynamic, yielding contradictory effects on gender and ethnic relations (see, for example, Joseph 1991, Molyneux 1991, Chhachhi, 1991, Kandiyoti, 1991). In the case of Israeli Palestinians, the state has strengthened clanship loyalties as a preventive against political radicalization (assuming that clan politics keeps in check the power of the younger generations) and as a tool for political mobilization (Al-Haj 1989). It likewise encouraged religious factionalism, again to reinforce divisive trends within this community (Al-Haj 1989, Sa’ar 1998). At the same time, it has promoted discriminatory and control policies toward its Palestinian citizens as a whole, hence furthering the crystallization of unifying national sentiments. Then again, Palestinian women *as individuals* have benefited from some degree of legal and financial protection, in the form of voting and litigation rights, free compulsory education, and welfare benefits, which have had a potentially empowering effect on them. Other factors were the massive loss of lands to the state, which accelerated the erosion of patriarchal control over the children and in turn contributed to radical changes in family relations, or the exposure to Israeli-Jewish lifestyles (Rouhana and Ghanem 1999).

Domestic power is often connected to the participation of the household as a unit and of individual members within it in the informal economy (Ghvamshahidi 1995, Hijab 2001, Moghadam 1995, 1997, White 1994).

However, the significance of women's paid and unpaid work for the survival and advancement of their families has not necessarily promoted their power or economic independence. Instead, it has produced contradictory results. For example, Annelies Moors (1991) found that Palestinians in the Nablus area in the West Bank changed from subsistence agriculture of men and women to migration wage labor of men, with women remaining in agriculture. The change limited women's access to property, devalued their labor, and generally increased their dependence on men. At the same time, the changing gender division of economic participation has actually *increased* the autonomy of women in marriage decision making.

Another major source of domestic power lies in the frequent occasions of politics literally being "brought home," when homes serve as a meeting or a hiding place, and as people use domestic resources to conduct political activities. Documenting the lives of Palestinian refugees in Shatila camp in Lebanon between 1968 and 1982, Julie Peteet (1991, 2001) describes the political activism of women, much of which was centered within and between households, and shows the process through which "domesticity came to be associated with struggle and militancy" (2001:138). Moreover, women in the camps, especially those who have lost a husband or children, proclaim their family labor as a form of struggle, and their coping with personal loss as a form of national endurance (*ṣumūd*) (Sayigh 1993). In a less strenuous context, Palestinians inside Israel use homes to hold election meetings or as candidates' headquarters, a situation that bears an important knowledge-power potential for the women of the household (Yahya-Younis 2001). Yet despite the empowering effect of their behind-the-scenes participation, women by and large remain excluded from formal politics. Two Palestinian women to date were elected to the Israeli Knesset. In the late 1990s, Husniyya Jbara (a Muslim) served one term as representative of the Zionist left Meretz party, and in 2006 Nadia Hilu (a Christian) finally got a seat after more than a decade-long membership in the Labor party. Further, the local arena, which in other countries serves as leverage for women's entrance to national politics (Herzog 1994), is blocked for women, as it is dominated by patriarchal clans (*ḥamāyil*) (Rouhana and Ghanem 1999; Al-Haj and Rosenfeld 1990; Yahya-Younis 2002).

Articulations of Gender and Power in the Case of Israeli Palestinians

Structural power, writes Eric Wolf (1990), shapes the social field of action, rendering some kinds of behavior possible while making others less possible or

impossible, and upholding one version of signification as true, fruitful, or beautiful against other possibilities that may threaten truth, fruitfulness, or beauty. The discourse of *qawiyyi*, which as shown shortly portrays strong, accomplished, and prominent women, who are challenged not to violate the normative boundaries of feminine morality, is a good example of this, as their transformative, generative power is incessantly pitted against forces of coercion and domination. Strong women need to accommodate their pride, resourcefulness, and independent personality with overwhelmingly patriarchal structures and values. The way in which each woman handles these complex pressures is critical in deciding whether her achievements will be socially accepted and even praised, or whether her strength will be reframed negatively, as dangerous, immoral, or not-feminine.

If we think of power and weakness as two ends of a scale, and of masculinity and femininity as two ends of another scale, and then examine the relationships between these two imaginary fields, we will come up with an intricate web of contact points. The discourse of *qawiyyi*, or its etic parallel feminine strength, represents one such contact point. Furthermore, since articulations of gender/power are historically specific, rather than theoretical, the balance that women who earn the title *qawiyyi* embody reflects a contextual femininity, one that entails particular ideas of modernity and morality.

To clarify the contextual aspect of feminine strength, I will dwell on yet another stopping point on the imaginary gender-power web, which I term “masculine power.” This type will be exemplified through the figures of both a man and a woman, so as to highlight the malleability of gender and its strong performative quality. The woman, who for the purpose of this discussion I classify as having obtained masculine power, differs from those strong women who habitually earn the compliment *qawiyyi*, in that she is much more self-centered and not at all altruistic. Her energies are invested mostly in the public domain (namely her career and extensive social life) and not in the family. Most importantly, what makes her case pertinent to the present discussion is that despite her independent lifestyle and the evident provocation that it implies for the local norms of feminine morality, this woman resists any attempts to either break her power or devalue her femininity. In the following analysis, therefore, women who are locally classified as “strong” (*qawiyyi*) represent the limitations that normative femininity imposes on women’s ability to accrue power. Conversely, those whom I classify as “powerful” pose an important challenge to this norm, by embodying broader options to legitimate femininity.

Intrinsic Dilemmas of a Feminist Constructionism

Looked at from the English-speaking tradition of academic feminism, the phenomenon of feminine strength raises the question of women's will and ability to transform the patriarchal system. Indeed, my ethnography focuses on the interplay between the creativity with which women who are called *qawiyyi* challenge patriarchal limitations and expand their life opportunities, and their inclination to identify with values of male domination. Yet since such questions, and the very terminology that they use or imply, are culturally specific they need to be carefully assessed. Saba Mahmood (2005) has articulated this problem lucidly in her work on the women's mosque movement in Cairo. Arguing for uncoupling the notion of agency from that of resistance, she notes that much of feminist scholarship remains entrenched in a binary model that expects subordination to yield subversion, and anticipates resistance where there is oppression. According to Mahmood, the binary model cannot capture the actual range of projects, desires, and discourses that do not necessarily abide by its logic. For example, against what would be a central expectation of liberal and progressive thought, women in Cairo did not harbor a desire to be free from male domination. Likewise, for them docility, the pious disciplining of the body, did not contradict agency. To emphasize the dialectic (as opposed to contradictory) relations between domination and agency, Mahmood brings up Foucault's and Butler's idea of the paradox of subjectivation, according to which the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent (*ibid.*: 17).

To a degree, my observations of *qawiyyi* have been informed by an implicit expectation that they should serve as agents of change, which mirrors my own historical positioning. As a highly educated Israeli-Jewish woman from the dominant ethnic group (Ashkenazi), I come to this research with a strong sense of women's entitlement to complete social parity. While the patriarchal nature of Israeli state and Israeli-Jewish society invariably frustrate such hopes in women like me, my relative access to the liberal dividend (Sa'ar 2005) still sets the bar of expectations no lower than full gender equality. Conversely, for Israeli-Palestinian women the desire to turn the gender order on its head is not necessarily as obvious. These women face complex and multiple forms of oppression, and for many of them a balanced and harmonious domestic sphere may well be the safest, and the only, resort.

A critical feminist analysis, then, needs to tread a fine line between the commitment to anti-essentialist, historical, and non-binary conceptualiza-

tions, and the commitment to discern and articulate oppression, discrimination, and inequalities, such as the ones that exist between Palestinian men and women and between Palestinians and Jews in Israel. One particular hurdle lies in terminology. The constructionist approach, as presented in the literature review, alerts us against any binary positioning such as feminine and masculine, or power and strength, as in the terms “feminine strength” and “masculine power.” On the other hand, discarding the contradictory terminology altogether may yield the undesirable outcome of reducing issues of domination and inequality to the point of denying them. Moreover, the strong tendency in contemporary critical scholarship to avoid conceptual dichotomies lest they be reified often creates a troublesome distance between the ways anthropologists have come to think about culture and local versions of culture, which remain unapologetically essentialist (Grillo 2003).

Debates over the costs and benefits of using the Master’s tools to dismantle the Master’s house, to paraphrase Audre Lorde’s (1983) famous title, have been quite prominent on the feminist agenda.² In this dilemma, I join Toril Moi (1997, 115) in the view that “it is necessary at once to deconstruct the opposition between traditionally ‘masculine’ and traditionally ‘feminine’ values *and* to confront the full political force and reality of such categories.” Put differently, while retaining the binary notions of female and male locks the discussion within the metaphysical trap of ruling masculine logic, dispensing with them does away with the possibility of a political analysis and struggle. In my view, the understanding of gender as positional, as explained above, provides a way out of the essentialist trap. Similarly to Connell and Mouff, Julia Kristeva also refers to the feminine in terms of positionality, as opposed to essences, as that which occupies a marginal position within the symbolic order. As Kristeva’s interpreter Toril Moi (1997, 111) explains, “This relational ‘definition’ is as shifting as the various forms of patriarchy itself, and allows her to argue that men can also be constructed as marginal to the symbolic order.”

Local Conditions

This study is based on fifteen months of anthropological fieldwork that I did between 1997 and 1999, when I lived in an urban Palestinian community inside Israel, also paying periodic visits to several villages in the central and northern regions.³ The basic methodology employed was participant observation. It included informal visits in people’s homes, volunteering at local NGOs,

and attending a diverse range of social, religious, and political community events. Additionally, I collected life histories and conducted formal interviews with several dozen individuals, mostly women, Muslims and Christians of various age groups.

Israeli Palestinians are a community of about one million people, 82% of them Muslims, 9% Christians, and 9% Druzes (Israel 2002).⁴ The key historical event of their modern history was the war of 1948, following which the state of Israel came into existence. Large numbers of Palestinian villages were ruined, and their inhabitants became dispossessed. The majority of those who eventually became citizens of the new state did not lose their homes,⁵ yet they too suffered significant loss of land and livelihood, and were often separated from close kin. After 1948 the Palestinian citizens of Israel underwent a process of proletarianization, as agriculture shrunk to insignificance due to policies of land confiscation and exclusion from agricultural subsidies. At the same time, they have largely continued to live in their villages, which have grown into small towns and in some cases cities, albeit without the anticipated urban cultural economy (Khamayseh 1998, Zahalka 1998). Concomitantly, their integration into Jewish-dominated cities has been limited. In terms of class, Israeli Palestinians are mostly lower-middle class and poor (Israel 2002, Stier and Lewin 1999, Swirski and Conur-Atiyas 2002), with a narrow yet vibrant middle class, whose members tend to be educated, people of the world, and politically conscious. Notwithstanding their concentration in the lower-middle and lower echelons, this population has undergone, especially during the 1990s, a steady rise in standard of living (Israel 2002, Matras 2001). Along with entry into white-collar occupations, this has contributed to diversification in lifestyle, cultural orientation, gender relations, and norms of familial interaction.

A national minority identified with Israel's most immediate enemy, the Palestinian citizens have had a fragile, sometimes even wavering political status. In many senses it seemed to be consistently improving due to the progressive easing of the Israeli control system (Lustick 1980, Rouhana 1989). The 1990s in particular witnessed a sense of openness toward the Palestinian citizens. The Oslo peace accords brought about opportunities for regional trade, tourism, and cultural exchange, in which they acted as prominent agents. That decade was also characterized by a deluge of national, regional, and global opportunities for mass consumption, in which Israeli Palestinians joined alongside Israeli Jews. However, the year 2000 marked a dramatic setback to all this: with the eruption of the second *Intifada* in October that year,

the Arabs Inside (a common label attached to Israeli Palestinians by other Palestinians) held mass demonstrations that resulted in 13 dead and hundreds detained without a trial for months on end. Since then, Israeli Palestinians have experienced a sharp tightening of police control, including another 16 citizens who were killed by security forces, a growing public racism against them, and a Jewish terrorist attack in a large community inside the Green Line.⁶

I move now to some ethnographic examples of the *qawiyyi* moral code, where I dwell on an underlying need to balance femininity and power. I then expand the descriptions to include some masculine forms of power, as represented by a man and a woman, in order to highlight the dynamic and permeable nature of gender and power categories. Finally, the discussion is dedicated to locating gender relations within the broader context of a trapped minority (Rabinowitz 2001), and the ways in which feminine strength echoes ongoing *collective* efforts to balance opposing forces that operate on this community.

Analysis

“Qawiyyi,” An Ethnographic Portrayal of a Local Code of Behavior

In Israeli-Palestinian culture the adjective *qawiyyi*—strong (feminine form)—is commonly used.⁷ Unlike the masculine *qawi*, which may serve as a common adjective, *qawiyyi* indicates a personality trait that is specifically feminine. A woman likely to earn the title *qawiyyi* is a savvy, strategizing actor with an assertive personality and strong will, who knows how to stand on her own, to maximize her resources, and to survive harsh circumstances with honor. She never flags in resisting attempts of other people, especially her male relatives, to control her and put her down. Yet she is not what local people would call in dismay a ‘feminist.’ For a *qawiyyi* derives her prestige, first and foremost, from her excellent performance in a wide range of feminine roles. She is a superb home-maker, mother, and wife, and often she also holds down a paying job, continues her education, and occasionally gets involved in different social and political activities. In large part the adjective *qawiyyi* is spoken as a compliment, and indeed women like to repeat it as part of their presentation of self. However, unlike other words of praise, such as *shāṭri* (industrious) or *wā’yi* (sensible), which are pretty straightforward, *qawiyyi* may sometimes assume a mocking or negative nuance, suggesting that a woman so called may be some-

what dangerous or immoral.⁸ For example, a woman of a village in the Galilee whose house had been broken into construed the burglars' identity from certain clues they left (the burglars were her neighbors, therefore familiar to her) and went with her findings to the police. The policeman, a local man himself, was deeply impressed, and told her, "You are *qawiyyi*." But then, she told me, she made herself stop figuring things out because she began to fear her own power. She also noticed that people around her were becoming uneasy.

The local label "strong" clearly indicates that in the eyes of their own community women have a certain degree of justifiable access to power. At the same time, many refrain from converting their personal strength into socially recognized authority; those who do not, risk serious de-legitimization, including devaluation of their femininity. The following detailed perusal of the various strategies in which capable Israeli-Palestinian women maneuver their achievements will reveal some of the contradictions that inhere in local notions of femininity.

Sanā' (a pseudonym) is a 40-year-old mother of five children, the youngest of whom was three months old when I first met her in 1997. She lives in an urban community. She is a qualified schoolteacher and a college student for the second time (adding a specialty to her B.E.D.), pursuing both activities full-time. On the day I was supposed to meet her she called me asking to postpone the interview because she was running a fever. When I called her three days later to reschedule, I was surprised to learn that she had not stayed in bed on the day we were originally supposed to meet but had taken her children for a day out at the mall and then the beach. "I had promised my daughters and couldn't disappoint them," she explained. "They are teenagers now and it's summer vacation... They deserve to have some fun, and since I don't let them go out by themselves I must go with them. I was really sick last Monday, but still I felt I *had to* take them out." While initially Sanā's behavior seemed somewhat excessive, especially considering that summer vacation was only half way through, as our acquaintance grew, it began to fit into my growing impression of her as a "superwoman." Her daily activities, as I heard her relate them on several occasions, always added up to an enormous number. Besides her paying job, her studies, caring for her five children, and various other outdoor activities, which included participation in community events, to which she also donated cooked food, Sanā' kept a meticulously clean home. This meant not only daily tidying, laundering, sweeping, and washing the floors, but also regular performance of more thorough chores. A certain day of the week was dedicated to airing all the beds, another to window cleaning, and

so on. Other heavy jobs, such as doing out the closets, she performed every few weeks, or at most on a bimonthly basis. Sanā's teenage daughters helped her with the lighter chores, such as dusting and sweeping, but she still did all the heavy work by herself. Cooking, the most prestigious task of a housewife, was particularly important. Sanā' served her family freshly cooked food five days a week. On the remaining two days they would eat out or at her mother's. Sanā' seemed to manage her household like a well-run enterprise, in which she was the supreme authority. Whenever she talked about the specifics of her domestic management, she would proudly assert that her husband "doesn't lift a finger" at home. The only thing she insisted on, she told me, was that he should take a day off once a week to spend quality time with the family. Sanā' likes her image of an enterprising, resourceful, and strong woman. On several occasions, when I met her in public, I heard women say about her, "*qawiyyi!*" She clearly enjoys hearing the admiring responses that she generates in women. In one of our conversations she said, "People often ask me how I manage to do all the things that I do. And I say to them: Why, the day is long! It starts at 6 a.m., doesn't it?" I heard her bring up this same theme, with variations, on several other occasions.

Women like Sanā' are not rare. Strong women can be both Muslim and Christian, city or village dwellers. A woman likely to be called *qawiyyi* is she who not only demonstrates the appropriate combination of resourcefulness, a strong mind, and good social sense (*wa'y*). Her personal situation should preferably be normative. As I document elsewhere in detail (Sa'ar 2000, 2004), an unmarried or divorced woman is more likely to be stigmatized for the same behavior that will earn a married woman the title *qawiyyi*, although it is not impossible for "women without men" (Jansen 1987) to achieve respectable status in their community. The following example conveys some of this complexity.

Imtiyāz is a 42 year-old Muslim widow from a northern border village inside Israel. Her mother gave birth to eight girls before she had her only son, and Imtiyāz recalls how her father would send his wife and the daughters away with each newborn daughter. He consequently left them, hungry and destitute, two years after the birth of his son. Forced to leave school after eighth grade, Imtiyāz joined the work force to help support the family, working at a shop and then looking after the house and her younger siblings. When she was seventeen her father married her off to a relative of his in the south. This husband was illiterate and a drug addict, and she became the sole breadwinner, doing cleaning and cooking jobs for wedding halls and institutions in the city

where they lived. The husband eventually died of a drug overdose, leaving her with three children and on the breadline again. She returned to her mother's village, "with not enough money to buy a carton of milk." At the time of the interview she was living in a two-story house she had built in the village, with her mother and two unmarried children, in their early twenties. When asked to choose an image to describe her life, Imtiyāz picked a picture of fire. "Since I was born I have found fire in front of me," she said, recalling how they had to flee their home when she was in preschool, at the time of the 1967 war. Yet for all her adversity, Imtiyāz has managed to improve her life steadily. Despite her poor education, which limited her to low-paying menial jobs, she used her work to network extensively, inside and outside her community, including with Jewish women and with people from higher social classes. She prides herself for her fluent Hebrew and familiarity with urban manners, which is not common among low-educated village women. She has been an active member of a Jewish-Arab women's group, The Valley's Women, that works toward improving the services and physical conditions in the village, organizes lectures, and holds tea parties. The network of reciprocity that Imtiyāz has built throughout her life has yielded better jobs (for example, home caring for old people through the National Insurance Institute), and opportunities to socialize with "highly respectable women," as she put it. These include a school principal, a doctor's wife, and the wife of the head of the local municipality.

Imtiyāz's friendliness, energies, and charisma stand out against her life-long hardship. She started her life as an unwanted daughter, spent her childhood living in poverty, then became the wife of a dropout husband, and eventually a widow and a single mother. Like her own mother, she is a woman without a man. She is *qawiyyi*, certainly, and this features as a major motif in the "personal myth" (McAdams 1993) that she creates through her life-story. However, her strength and visible success generate mixed responses, especially since despite herself she does not lead a normative life. While many of her close and supportive relations are with outsiders (Jews), inside her village some have suspected that she might be a collaborator.

Compared with Imtiyāz, Sanā' is a closer embodiment of the ideal *qawiyyi*, or in fact the ideal woman. She is married and a mother of five, the last-born a long-awaited son. Her husband is a respected member of the community and fully supportive of her. In fact, his support constitutes a constant theme in her self-description. For example, she likes to mention his coming to collect her from college, on which occasions she offers her colleagues a ride home. She also lets it be known that from time to time she "leaves every-

thing” and goes to the neighborhood cafe all on her own to treat herself to coffee and cake. Such a distinctly urbane gesture feeds back into her overall mastery of modernity which, as noted also by Rhoda Kanaaneh (2002), is seen as increasingly important in up-to-date wives. Inasmuch as it produces respect and appreciation, then, feminine strength has a harmonizing effect on women’s environment, where connectivity among kin (Joseph 1999) implies sharing of personal capital. Hence the discourse of *qawiyyi* reflects positively not only on gender identity, but on national identity. As I show in detail shortly, managing a successful balance between conflicting demands is a national moral preoccupation. By the same token, sanctions on women who seem to be using power unduly may again take on a national overtone, as in the example of Imtiyāz.

Still, even Sanā’ faces resentment. Her in-laws, for example, frequently feel that she fails to give them their due respect and attention, complaints that repeatedly stir tensions between her and her husband, and non-relatives sometimes criticize her for being too bossy. Similar pressure was reported also by Muna, a recently wed young woman. Muna was living in an extended-family situation with her in-laws, who were also supporting the young couple through her husband’s university studies. She told of recurring strain between her and her husband on similar grounds. *Qawiyyi* by her self-description as well as by her neighbors, Muna waged constant battles with her mother-in-law over decisions concerning her nuclear unit within the household, be it with respect to home renovation, buying a car, continuing her university studies after giving birth, etc. Like Sanā’, Muna too repeatedly mentioned the full support she received from her husband. He paid for her education, left the project of house renovation entirely to her management, and backed her up when she’d stay out late for her social activism (her mother helped out with the baby through all that). Nevertheless, he would frequently turn against her, following his mother’s complaints about her conduct. Friction between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law in Arab societies is commonly documented, so much so that it is seen as normative. Daughters-in-law are structurally weak, and this is a good enough reason for them to fight, especially, with the growing nuclearization of families and the increasing popularity of romantic love between spouses, if they stand better chances than in the past to win the hearts of their husbands. This, in fact, is one of the quintessential opportunities for women to institute themselves as *qawiyyi*. In a sense, the very normativeness of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law tension may be a factor contributing the much needed tinge of legitimacy to their emergence as strong women.

While resistance to control is not uncommon among Israeli-Palestinian women, and among Middle Eastern women generally (Abu-Lughod 1990, Accad 1993, Haeri 2002), in the case of *qawiyyi* the boundaries of resistance are clearly delineated within a particular morality of modernity and tradition. Such women are strong, therefore necessarily somewhat unsettling. Yet they are *admirable*, therefore also largely reassuring. They respond to, and in fact embody, a melange of contradictory images, aspirations, and norms that preoccupy their community as a whole. These, to mention only a few, are the aspiration to integrate into modern life while safeguarding their “authentic culture,” to maintain national pride while surviving an oppressive control system, to try and get a head-start in a decaying educational system, or to make do with scarce resources and a rising cost of living. Like these challenges, the *qawiyyi* code of behavior is characterized by an ongoing effort to balance opposing forces. The task of resisting social norms without forfeiting the soft embrace of social consensus may seem impossible; indeed, not all women manage it. A core characteristic of strong women is that they do manage it, with just a *sustainable* measure of risk and friction. While they occasionally arouse resentment and even hostility, their cushion of support is padded enough to absorb it, thanks to a supportive husband or father, but mostly thanks to their personal confidence and ingenuity.

“Feminine Strength,” An Analytical Version of Qawiyyi

I propose the term feminine strength for the complex of feminine behavior and personality type that is locally referred to as *qawiyyi*. This terminology draws on a semantic distinction between “strength” and “power.” Power designates control or influence exercised over others (particularly other adults). Strength refers to the quality of being physically or mentally strong, the ability to withstand great pressure or force, to act, and to resist. According to this distinction, power is mainly other-oriented while strength is primarily self-oriented. The local construction of feminine strength entails a certain moral superiority that emanates from the framing of a woman’s actions as heroic and altruistic; power entails the ability to convert symbolic capital, including the attribute of internal strength, into public status,⁹ official authority, or a formal/paid political position. I argue that in Israeli-Palestinian culture power in the sense mentioned here is primarily a masculine resource. Even though it is not impossible for women to have it, women who acquire public forms of authority, for example through professional or political careers, are very like-

ly to attract hostility and stigma, including symbolic undermining of their femininity. This gender classification of power, which is historical rather than essential, is what guides strong women as they walk the fine line between registering personal achievements and losing social support.

Feminine strength, in the Israeli-Palestinian version, has four major and closely related characteristics. First, it is heroic. *Qawiyyi* women are survivors who manage to achieve impressive results even when their life situation is decidedly unfavorable. Second, in contrast to masculine power, which is public and obvious, feminine strength must remain informal. While strong women are very keen to receive acknowledgment from relatives and acquaintances, they are extremely reluctant to convert this acknowledgment into official (public) status. Instead, they cultivate an altruistic image.¹⁰ It is very common to hear highly achieving women say, "I didn't do that in order to receive a reward." Attempting to cash their achievements in political currency would frame them as egotistic, and thereby undermine the heroic aspect of their strength. Third, feminine strength is individualistic: *qawiyyi* women do not tend to bond, and their strength is not amenable to collective, gender-based claims for power. The term individualistic here does not refer to the women's personality or inclinations. They actually tend to be well immersed in their families, who gain from their achievements no less than they themselves. Feminine strength, rather, is individualistic in the sense that it is not amenable for gender-based alliances. Finally, feminine strength encourages gender conformity. Strong women tend to live quite comfortably with the idea that men and women are essentially different, and consequently their roles and positions in society are and should remain different.

More than an adjective, *qawiyyi* is a discourse of praise that defines the proper way of managing the complex of possibilities and constraints that Israeli-Palestinian women face. Among the many ways in which women cope, resist, and survive, those who are likely to be called *qawiyyi* usually also participate in the discourse themselves, by taking visible and active pleasure in enumerating their outstanding achievements. They do not demand an egalitarian gender division of labor, because they derive their sense of strength precisely from the against-all-odds aura that surrounds their daily survival. Sanā's dramatic gesture of taking her daughters off to the beach when she was running a fever is an example of an underlying theme in the self-presentation of this woman. This is excessive sacrifice, which is at the same time accompanied by a sense of strength and satisfaction, with no trace of submissiveness or self-pity.

Strength, Power, and Gender

Depletion of femininity as a result of acquiring power is not unique to Palestinian or to Middle Eastern cultures. A good example is the institution of female husbands, known in more than thirty African societies. In an array of male-dominated systems, women may become husbands through taking on wives when they are about to enter positions of leadership (O'Brien 1977), or if in the absence of sons they need to take up the management of their property (Smith Oboler 1980). More often than not, the transformation of women into husbands-males does not include change of sex or sexual orientation, but is related to changing their position within a power order. Denise O'Brien, who reviewed and classified the different documented instances of this institution, writes, "in at least some societies, if women are expected either to exercise power or to symbolize power, they must be conceptualized as male, or at least must not take on the subordinate status of wife" (1977: 122). Another intriguing case is the Albanian sworn virgins. Found mostly in the rural areas, where family farms are passed on, cultivated, and managed by males only, these born females are transformed into social males, through never marrying and taking vows of celibacy. They assume a distinctly male appearance (notably, they adopt the male dress code, which is very distinct from that of females) and males' duties, rights, and manners, and enjoy the higher status accorded to men in this strongly patriarchal society. Antonia Young (2000) asserts that the primary justification of this phenomenon is economic. Being left with no males to head the household is dysfunctional for families. Therefore they assign the role to one of their daughters, who, in return, becomes a social male. While sexual orientation and personality may or may not play a part in the choice of the particular daughter, the institution of sworn virgins is strictly about gender, not sex. The major role of sworn virgins is to head the family household, work the land, and manage the property. If necessary, some of them are also prepared to take up arms to participate in blood feuds and protect the family honor. Here again, the relation between gender and power appears quite strikingly. Through the historic assigning of positions of management, leadership, ownership, and defense to men, power has become identified with the male gender.

The examples of female husbands and sworn virgins suggest that in some cultural contexts it is easier to adapt the gender of the persons fulfilling positions of power than to reconstruct the gender of the positions themselves. Unlike these somewhat dramatic examples, the Israeli-Palestinian gender-power construction includes a significant range of nuances, as the masculin-

ization of women who assume power is given to some negotiation. Next I introduce two examples of what I call “masculine power,” the first embodied by a man, the second by a woman. This brief focus on different points on the gender/power web, besides the one represented by feminine strength, is intended to conclude the theoretical gist of my argument. To reiterate, I contend that gender and power are mutually informing and constantly shifting. They *appear* as fixed attributes, because they are embodied by people who live under concrete historical structures. Their dynamic aspect does leave its mark “on the ground,” through the agency of persons coping in real-life situations, yet the possibility of change is limited by the enormity of long-standing power-gender regimes.

Masculine Power

Ḥasan is about forty years old, the husband of Sanā'. A member and former head of the local Islamic Committee, he is one of his town's officially recognized notables. This status entails a certain amount of time investment (mainly attending meetings) and earns him a medley of the standard marks of respect, such as occasional interviews in the local newspapers, requests to serve as arbitrator or as guest of honor, or invitations to participate in meetings of “the local Arab community” with different state officials. Ḥasan is locally regarded as a rather passive man and is regularly criticized, in private conversations, for never coming up with initiatives, for delaying action, hence for lowering the level of activities of the Islamic Committee. Yet he has been reelected to office for several successive terms, mainly because of the strategic position that his family has occupied in the overall power structure of local clans (*ḥamāyil*). Within this structure, the middle-range position of Ḥasan's family renders him a convenient candidate for the stronger *ḥamāyil*.

Officially, Ḥasan is a powerful man, even if not optimally so. Generally known for his moralist-cum-modernist attitudes, his wife's career fits well into his enlightened image. While behind his back people occasionally ridicule him for putting up with her domineering ways, Ḥasan compensates for his potential loss of power to his wife through his honored position, his aura of self-importance and religious conservatism, and the deep respect she pays him in public. Ḥasan has power, even though by local standards his personality is regarded as weaker than his wife's. Ideally, of course, it would be better if he also had internal strength of personality, better yet charisma. Still, according to the local normative masculinities, this is not a necessary condi-

tion, because masculinity is largely a positional identity. Aside from his reproductive capacity (particularly begetting a son after four daughters), which also testifies to his virility, Ḥasan is a father, a husband, and scion of a respected family. These are, by definition, positions of domination, and through them his masculinity and his power become inextricably linked.

Ḥasan's example illuminates some general characteristics of power. First, as long as it is defined through a position of domination, masculinity entails power. Secondly, masculine power is formal and easily convertible—it is in fact expected to be convertible—into political/public status. Thirdly, power facilitates men's bonding. Notwithstanding the long segmentary tradition of potential rivalry among male relatives, when individual men come together *as men* (say, to form a party, an ad hoc coalition of kin groups, etc.) they do not risk depleting their masculinity by doing so. Moreover, although they may occasionally lose power to one another, they nevertheless also stand a good chance of increasing their power through enlisting group support. Masculine power is pretty much the opposite of feminine strength, which is not surprising if we consider the local binary construction of gender in Israeli-Palestinian culture.

Unlike feminine strength, which is constructed primarily as a personal quality molded to a specific cultural form, what I have called masculine power is primarily a cultural asset, whose correspondence to personal traits is secondary. Although most individuals are likely *not* to live up to the cultural ideals of masculinity, within a certain range a good number do stand to reap the fruits of respectability and potential power that accompany it, *because they are men*. Ḥasan, again, is admittedly not highly revered and may also not necessarily be locally considered as particularly powerful. But this precisely is why his case is pertinent to my argument. His largely nominal power is anchored in his social position, which is inextricably entwined with his masculinity (son of, father of, homeowner, etc.), rather than in his personal qualities. While Ḥasan may be personally less powerful than other men in his vicinity, his position grants him official presence and influence that outreach those of Sanā', and that are potentially much more easily transformable into other kinds of capital (earnings, business networking, etc.). Masculine power as a cultural asset means that masculinity facilitates official influence and public presence. Whether these will or won't actually materialize depends, among other things, on personal capabilities, on social conjuncture, and on the overall assets available to people in a particular class, ethnic, and civic position.

Clearly, not all men are powerful. Yet this does not necessarily weaken the association between masculinity and power, as is apparent in the broad legit-

imacy given to symbolic practices of male domination, from arbitrary verdicts imposed on female relatives, through abusive manners, to exercising outright physical force against them (Españoli 1997, Hasan 2002, Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002). It is not uncommon for men to demand, and obtain, the termination of their wives'/sisters'/daughters' paid work or studies, with a very general argument of impropriety, or with no explanation at all. Clearly, too, such exercises of symbolic power themselves stand in complex relationship to the structural power that contemporary Israeli-Palestinian men struggle not to lose. In any case, the relevance of masculine power to the present discussion is that it is reluctant to admit women (see also Wood 2000:11). Women who violate the normative gender-power balance risk symbolic and social sanctions. One sanction, as I show elsewhere (Sa'ar 2001), is isolation and loneliness. Another is undermining of their femininity. Yet since hegemonic femininity (or masculinity) is never monolithic, some women do attempt to surpass strength and acquire power, while insisting on retaining their femininity.¹¹ The following and last figure, whom I call Hiyām, is a case in point.

Hiyām is a 34-year-old unmarried Muslim woman from an urban community. Holder of an academic degree, she moved, after several years of working as a teacher, to a managerial position in a large public institution. Alongside her professional employment, Hiyām has been active on the local political scene, chairperson of a local group that fights against land confiscation. To anyone hearing her speak at public events or articulate political problems in private conversations, her leader's charisma is immediately obvious. Her eloquent expression, her penetrating observations, and her physical beauty—which she highlights through a fashionable and extremely feminine dress style—give her a very powerful presence. Moreover, Hiyām's distinctly feminine appearance is doubly provocative considering the normative expectation that unmarried Israeli-Palestinian women should remain virgins in body, heart, and mind (Sa'ar 2000, 2004).

Along with affection and admiration, Hiyām routinely encounters opposition and resentment from her workmates, neighbors, and relatives. She tells, for example, of recurrent incidents of suspicion, resistance, and implied racism at work, which emanate from her being both an Arab woman in charge of an all-Jewish professional staff and a young fast-promoted woman in an unwieldy bureaucratic organization. At the same time, her successive promotions in a short period of time were based not only on her superiors' evaluations but also on the good rapport that she established with her staff. At home too, Hiyām invokes strong and contradictory emotional reactions. On the one

hand, she has authority and her opinion is sought in all the important decisions made in the household, and often also in the extended family. She is asked to arbitrate in domestic conflicts or to mitigate parents' angry rejections of their children's requests. But, on the other hand, she habitually sustains sarcastic and offensive comments from her mother, siblings, and relatives. Occasionally she also sustains outright accusations of alleged immoral behavior, which she usually silences in a quick and decisive fashion.

According to the classification of power that I proposed above, it would be more accurate to think of Hiyām as "powerful" than as "strong," since her assertive manner exceeds the unspoken limitations that are imperative to the notion of *qawiyyi*. She regularly exerts power over other adults and translates her personal capabilities into public capital, mostly professional and partly also political (she has not, so far, run for formal political office). In some symbolic respects, Hiyām's power is at the expense of her gender identity. Most notably, she has remained unmarried. In Israeli-Palestinian culture, an unmarried female is symbolically constructed as a not-yet-woman, or a child, and, in a less consistent fashion, also as potentially masculine. The childish construction is routinely expressed through verbal and non-verbal gestures, among them the noun *binet* (literally girl or daughter), which serves as the standard reference to unmarried women. In the particular case of unmarried females with powerful personality, such as Hiyām, the message that something is wrong with their femininity comes across also through the tendency of men to classify them as non-marriageable. Several such women, including Hiyām, told of men who became enamored of them but who eventually married other women. The explanations that emerged were always the same, whether the men expressed them explicitly or implicitly; although they each loved the woman, they could not envisage her as a wife. Alternatively, such women are symbolically re-classified as males. Several women, married and not married, with a "powerful" personality type similar to Hiyām's, said that a common compliment that they receive is, "You are better than ten men."

The example of Hiyām complicates, and complements, my initial argument. As I mentioned, Hiyām is very feminine at the same time as being powerful; significantly, she qualifies as feminine by the local standards of her own community. She resists the attempts by her surroundings to cope with her seemingly out-of-place power by classifying her as a child (weak), a male (legitimately powerful), or an immoral woman (negatively powerful). By assuming a distinctly feminine body language, Hiyām, and other women like her, reject the implied norm that power and femininity are mutually exclu-

sive. Ceaselessly asserting themselves as at once womanly and powerful, they are prepared to absorb many symbolic offenses, and cultivate personal support that compensates for such offenses. Notwithstanding local binary constructions, they embody the transformability and mutual permeability of femininity and masculinity.

The Historical Context of Personal Agency

From a social-system point of view, feminine strength serves as a sophisticated barrier to change, in that it displaces power and presents it as gender (a woman who moves from being strong to being powerful risks losing her femininity). Still, the barrier to change is far from being entirely within the realm of the personal, as gender is produced within broader power structures. Being a woman (or a man) in Israeli-Palestinian culture today entails a series of positional identities: in the family, in the workplace, in the domain of the state, in the ethnic community, etc., and these in turn reflect structures that are historically situated. As mentioned, the living conditions of Israeli Palestinians are fraught with contradictions. Palestinians inside Israel are a political minority with only limited civil rights and overwhelming socio-economic disadvantages, who at the same time are immersed in modern life and in intense consumerism. In this setting, patriarchy operates through several parallel models simultaneously. Consequently, women may be subjected to odd mixtures of different elements of male domination, from those familiar under classical, semi-feudal models to those that exist in rational-bureaucratic patriarchal regimes.

For one thing, local masculinity is more complicated than the way it was sketched earlier, considering the enormous gaps that men may experience between cultural expectations to be leaders, providers, and generally in charge, to the practical reality of marginalization. Their leadership aspirations are frustrated throughout, from the micro level of routine exposure to state policing to the macro level of little or no access to either Israeli or Palestinian national politics. As providers too, Israeli-Palestinian men have faced serious difficulties, with soaring rates of unemployment and sub-standard earning (Sa'di and Lewin-Epstein 2001, Yonai and Kraus 2001), which emanate from the highly racist and ethnic national labor market on the one hand, and the economic truncation of the local Palestinian enclave on the other. Of course, new and updated meanings of how to be men are evolving as well, yet masculinity, at least among Palestinian men living inside Israel, is clearly undergoing a major crisis (Sa'ar and Yahia-Younis 2006).

On a collective scale, Israeli Palestinians are preoccupied with several aspects that concern their identity. These are, notably, their position in respect of the greater Palestinian nation, the Israeli state of which they are citizens but not quite full members, and the seemingly never-fading competition for moral superiority between the East and the West, a field where political Islam has been gaining momentum. The theme of modernity within the discourse of *qawiyyi* reflects the clear effect that these broad historical concerns have on the gender-power code of behavior. Ideally, strong women embody a wishful harmony between modernity and pre-colonial cultural morality, commonly a very fragile combination (Abu-Lughod 1998, Chatterjee 1989, Sa'ar 1998). They are outgoing, literally as well as metaphorically, up-to-date with Western styles, wage earners, preferably also educated, and sophisticatedly acquainted with the world outside their home. At the same time, the moral laxity that potentially accompanies such "modern" ways is efficiently neutralized as long as the women's achievements are channeled back home. Women's advanced education is seen as greatly contributing to their role of coaching their children through the daily school assignments, which is regarded an essential component of modern parenting.¹² Likewise, their knowledge of Hebrew and their bureaucratic literacy are reinvested in efficient home making. Finally, their modern manners and appearance reflect positively on their husbands, and therefore generally make them better wives.

Perhaps one of the most poignant symbols of the imbalance between modernity and cultural morality is feminism. As in national movements throughout the Middle East, the "woman's question" was prominent in Palestinian public discourse already during the first half of the 20th century (Fleishmann, 2003). The intertwining of national and gender issues during the colonial period continues to inform contemporary discussions of women. Therese Saliba and Jean Kattan (2000) note that among Palestinians in the PA, women's liberation (*tahrir al-mar'a*) is constructed positively in relation to national liberation and differently from Western ideas of feminism. Similarly, among Palestinians Inside, the Hebraized English adjective *feministit* (feminist) is generally negative, except among very small circles that believe in full sexual liberation of women. Conversely, *tahrir al-mar'a* does not yield an adjective. The title *qawiyyi* connotes a legitimacy that may be compatible with the national understanding of women's liberation. Proud of their cultural heritage, strong women skillfully use modernity without losing sight of local notions of propriety, and particularly without becoming 'more than neces-

sary' (*akthar min il-lāzem*) hedonistic, self-interested, or indeed powerful. Sanā', who teaches at an Arab public high school, said to me:

I can't believe the rude and dirty language that the girls in our school have started to use. I taught in Hebrew schools and I'm used to all this provocative language and behavior. And it is fine for Jewish girls. But to see our girls behave like that? What is this society coming to?!

Sanā' was talking here within the discourse of modern nationalism that frames Israeli Jews as Modern/Others, a concept that entails, at one and the same time, enviable achievements and moral inferiority. In the local version of modern nationalism, modernity is seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is regarded as the key to technological advancement and democracy. On the other hand, it represents sexual permissiveness and excessive materialism. In their capacity as embodiments of collective identity, women stand to benefit from modernity and their achievements, moreover, contribute to the collective success of their families and communities. Yet such achievements also entail the risk of modern temptations. The symbolic loss of femininity, of women who take 'too many' liberties represents, at one and the same time, the collective wish to hold on to a familiar organization of the universe, but also the inherently dynamic character of any ordering of difference. This is the underlying ideological framework that led Sanā' to cast categorical doubt on her students' ability to maintain the right balance between the positive and the negative influences of modernity. She did not, of course, feel that she herself was in danger of being morally contaminated through contact with the Modern/Other, because *she was a strong woman*. Her teaching at Jewish schools had not affected her moral judgment, just as having five children did not stop her from performing the vast range of her activities.

Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate the meanings of women's informal power among the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Analyzing one popular discourse on strong women, I argued that in this community capable women are encouraged not to transform their personal strength into a public status of authority. They invest their capabilities in competition against other women, while explicitly avoiding vying with men, or challenging the existing gender order. Looking at the broader context in which femininities and masculinities are

produced, I showed that this ethical code vividly echoes some of the major concerns of Israeli Palestinians generally, notably their preoccupation with modernity, cultural morality, and collective identity. By walking a fine line between conflicting demands and possibilities, women who are called *qawiyyi* embody the ongoing attempts of their community to uphold a moral existence, while balancing formidable constraints and new opportunities.

Importantly, “feminine strength” is not a static trait of personality. Rather, it is a behavioral code that represents one of several possible tangential points between mutually informing axes of power and gender. To illustrate this, I briefly alluded to another local articulation of gender and power, “masculine power.” I made a seemingly contradictory argument, stating that power is culturally sanctioned to the male gender but indicating that it is not impossible for women to acquire it. Notwithstanding the normative expectation implied in the discourse of *qawiyyi*, some strong women do manage to transform their personal strength into public power *without* appearing to become less feminine. My brief discussion of masculine power was thus intended to highlight the dynamic aspects of feminine strength. While not many women get away with being outright powerful and still regarded as respectable, the few who do engender an expansion of normative constructions of femininity, as well as the mutual permeability of femininity and masculinity.

This paper hopes to have contributed to the rich literature on women’s power in the Middle East in two major respects. First, by presenting ethnographic documentations of gendered naturalizations of power, it explores the particular implications of images and experiences of femininity of women’s lived performances of power. Treating gender as positional and historical, moreover, I trace how these naturalizations echo some of the collective concerns of the community more broadly. Secondly, I have contended that the preoccupation of the feminist literature with dispelling western impositions, for the apt reason that they all-too-often lead to reducing political oppression to gender oppression, risks falling into the opposite trap, of downplaying the implications of gender domination. The terms feminine strength and masculine power, notwithstanding their somewhat reductive resonance, are designed to capture essentialist moments in a fluid field of cultural constructions. Treated as resources, as opposed to permanent qualities, these concepts open an analytical space to discuss both power and gender as exercised rather than monopolized or absent, without losing sight of the cumulative effects of gross and persistent disparities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my many Palestinian friends and acquaintances for allowing me a glance into their lives. Fieldwork was largely made possible through the generous financial support of Wenner-Gren Foundation and Lady Davis Fellowship Trust. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Anthropological Quarterly*, and Murray Rosovsky for his careful editing of the manuscript.

ENDNOTES

¹Here too only one woman, Violet Khouri, was ever elected to head a local municipality, with a handful of others winning seats on municipal councils. Although these women were active and experienced behind the scenes of party politics, the major reason for their success was the particular power circumstances that made them good, namely non-threatening, candidates (Abu-Baker 1998).

²See, for example, Wittig 1992, Moi, 1997.

³Previously, I had spent two other extended periods of time with Israeli Palestinians. The first was in 1987-88, when I lived for a year with a family in one of the villages in central Triangle region, as part of my enrolment in a Jewish-Arab coexistence program. Consequently, in 1993-1994 I did my first fieldwork in a different urban community.

⁴Note that the total figure that appears in this publication is 1.2 million, because Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics counts the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem and the Druzes of the Golan Heights, which were annexed to Israel in 1967 and 1982, respectively. By the term Israeli-Palestinians I refer only to those residing inside the Green Line, hence the numerical gap. The present analysis likewise relates to Muslims and Christians, and excludes Druzes and Bedouins.

⁵On internal refugees, people whose villages were destroyed but they themselves remained within Israeli territory, mostly in neighboring villages, see Al-Haj (1986), The Association of Forty <http://www.assoc40.org/nenglish/>

⁶From: *Racism in Israel Report*, The Mossawa Center at <http://www.mossawa.org>

⁷In her work on Oman, Uni Wikan (1984:637) reports that the adjective is used in both the masculine and the feminine *qawi* (m.) / *qawiya* (f.). In contrast to its use among Israeli Palestinians, Omanis use *qawi/ya* in the sense of a generally positive attribute, which Wikan translates as "good" or "nice." Conversely, Lila Abu-Lughod (1986:109) cites the term *gāwya* as a pejorative term for the woman who lacks social sense (*ʿagl*) through becoming too willful. *Gāwya*—from the root *qwy*, to be strong or powerful—clearly pertains to hierarchical relations. The Bedouins use this particular adjectival form in reference only to females. It means something like 'overly strong' and suggests excessive assertiveness. The negative connotations of this sort of assertiveness derive from its inappropriateness for those in positions of dependency or social inferiority".

⁸A similarly ambiguous meaning of women's power is found in Greece, where strong women are accepted and often revered, but at the same time also regarded as *poniria*, cunning or devious (Dubisch 1986, Herzfeld 1986)

⁹Several ethnographers of the region have shown with respect to gender segregated societies, that contrary to the common identification of women's sphere as private and men's as public, it is more accurate to talk about two public spheres, men's and women's (Meneley 1996, see also Ghannam 1996). However, this description is less relevant in the case of Israeli Palestinians, where gender segregation is not as strict as, for example, Yemen or even Egypt. In this society, non-related males and females have varying degrees of opportunities to mix in both domestic and public settings, which of course renders the categories themselves somewhat fluid. At the same time, restricting the access of women and girls to spaces

outside the home, including work places, schools, or streets, is still a common sanction, which means that "public" does denote a relevant category. At minimum, this term could be used for the space where gender mixing is more frequent and less amenable to policing than domestic space.

¹⁰Several feminist writers have challenged the dichotomous conception of altruism and self-interest as mutually exclusive. Michaela Di Leonardo (1987) argued that kin work (the active maintenance of extended kin relationships through cards, calls, gifts, etc.), a quintessential gendered labor, at least in the US, potentially endows women with power, through cultivating obligations in men and children. Likewise, Jean Baker Miller (1987) contends that in a cultural environment that equates a woman's using self-determined power for herself to selfishness and destructiveness, which are in turn seen as irreconcilable with feminine identity, practices oriented to nurture and support others are themselves forms of power. While I agree that altruism, or generalized exchange, implies clear elements of informal power, I take issue here with the assessment of the overall effect of such power on the broader gender order.

¹¹In my work on unmarried Israeli-Palestinian women (Sa'ar 2000), I demonstrate how unmarried females establish themselves as 'women' de facto, even when they are symbolically constructed as children or as males. They do this through artful maneuvering of local norms, which enables them to stretch the normative boundaries of age and gender, and still claim morality and respectability.

¹²The theme of educated mothers as experts in the art of rearing the members of the modern nation was prominent already in the early stages of Palestinian nationalism (Fleischmann 2003:81).

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