

‘I WOULD HAVE DIED HAD GOD NOT SENT ME ELIJAH THE  
PROPHET’: CLASS, BODY, AND SEXUALITY IN THE LIFE STORIES OF  
ELDERLY ORIENTAL (*MIZRAHIOT*) WOMEN OF BEER SHEVA

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The humanities and social sciences of recent years in Israel deal much with marginal groups and various ‘others’. A conspicuous group of this kind is oriental or *mizrahiot* illiterate women, living in periphery areas and considered marginal in terms of geography, class, ethnicity, gender, and – with time – age, in relation to both hegemonic and other marginal groups. Different studies analyze their life stories and experiences in their countries of origin, with the intent of presenting the women as active subjects. These studies often voice the claim that the women have internalized the marginality attributed to them within Israeli society, and therefore they face hardships in experiencing their life events as meaningful and themselves as people that have a say.

Contrary to this view of *mizrahiot*, I aim to show that though they may appear by other groups as marginal, the women can still create and tell rich, complex – at times virtuoso – narratives and thus connect themselves to central events and issues in our society and culture. Moreover, some of them take advantage of their encounter with the institution of research and with an inquisitive and respectful researcher, to express explicit or implicit objection to stereotypical conceptions of themselves, thus asserting themselves as far from marginal. The interpretative-theoretical approach at the basis of my essay wishes to emphasize the women’s feminine creative power, and view it not only as expressing power relations and conflicts, but also as a creative means for constructing their own discursive worlds and for manipulating an existing social reality.

The essay analyzes the narratives of courtship and marriage of two elderly non-literate Beer Sheva women, and the daughter of one of them, as well as their descriptions of giving birth and child rearing. The passage from singlehood to marriage is depicted by both narrators as a situation that made them face crucial dilemmas and even risked their lives. Yet, through their successful tackling of these challenges they reconstructed themselves as heroines who managed to overcome life’s difficulties. At face value, these life stories are far from feminist manifestoes in the modern sense, and they are clearly anchored in masculine social norms. However,

a careful reading of the narrative and performative artistry of the women exposes that both carry on a significant, charged, at times conflictive and subversive, relationship with the tradition in and by which they live, as with the stereotypes attributed to them and to the authorities they overtly accept and respect. Thus the narratives move along the scale connecting preservation of patriarchal norms and fracturing or undermining them. In conclusion I stress the importance and contribution of folkloristic research to exposing the 'emic' or intrinsic viewpoint of women-narrators and to the understanding of home and marriage politics, connecting intellectual discourse and the poetics of everyday life.