

## POLITICS OF CONFORMITY: POWER FOR CREATING CHANGE<sup>1</sup>



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**A common theme in feminist Middle Eastern literature is the use of conformist behavior (e.g., veiling) to survive and create social change. This article goes further to suggest that giving up the chance to change one social norm promotes creating another. It examines this argument through the life stories of Palestinian Bedouin women who were the first of their tribes to study in institutions of higher learning. These women accepted endogamous prescriptions, sacrificing their emotional lives and personal choices, in order to pave the way for future generations of educated Bedouin women. They helped create social change in three categories: conformity through personal behavior, conformity through patriarchy, and conformity of emotions. The women's conformist behavior adopted a culturally accepted feminine self (relational and connective), which is crucial for their agency. Bedouin social structure is enacted through the women's agency, as their selves are formed through agency and affected by structure. (Agency, power, social change, Bedouin women)**

A common theme in feminist Middle Eastern literature is how women, through their behavior, dress, sexual activity, reproduction, and choice of partner, negotiate power and pursue their interests. (Papanek 1994; Kandiyoti 1988; Moghadam 1994). These studies show that behavior (such as wearing the veil, having a male escort in public) can be a manipulative way of passive resistance in order to promote social change in women's lives and in power relations.

The common starting point of extant research is the idea of using cultural resources and co-operating with the social structure in order to negotiate power relations. This essay goes further by emphasizing social change in Bedouin society as more than passive resistance: it is a process of alternatives and choice, of giving up the chance to change one social norm in order to promote and create another. This is illustrated in the life stories of Palestinian Bedouin women in Israel who were the first of their tribes to study in institutions of higher learning. These are women for whom new options opened, yet succumbed to the norm of marrying by tribal rules, sacrificing their emotional lives and personal choices in order to promote new social norms, and eventually creating a second generation of educated Bedouin women. That is, their adopted conformist behavior was in exchange for the ability to promote change in the schooling and employment of females and to retain the access they had gained in those arenas. This study aims to present the dialogue between subject and culture, showing how culture affects the individual's self and how structure is enacted through individuals. The narratives reveal a tension between the women's connective cultural selves (Joseph 1993) and their educated feminine selves (Erdreich 2006). These selves are constructed through the mediation of power relations embedded in social practice, and are themselves a practice.

## AGENCY AND POWER IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

Middle East studies focus on the ways men and women contest the boundaries of their transformative capacities and on the creative mechanisms people use to further their interests and negotiate power relations. In analyzing such agency, it is important to consider social structure and to contextualize experience because “actual experience and its mediation through the narrative are hard to separate with reference to the structure or dimensions (such as tradition and power)” (Muge and Balaghi 1994:4). Women influence gender power relations through the cultural limits imposed upon them, using these limits to promote their status in their families. They do so through passive and active resistance, playing by “the rules of the game and [using] different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options” (Kandiyoti 1988:274).

Women’s agency in changing power relations in a patriarchal society can take many forms, whether in private or public spheres. Agency of the private sphere is women’s use of feminine roles, female networks, and the family as resources, while agency of the public sphere is their use of resources such as the political arena and the marketplace.

Agency of the private is found in studies of nomadic societies that see the roles of women (usually perceived as marginalizing them) as turning them into powerful women who influence men. In reviewing studies on nomadic societies that show women using their feminine roles to affect gender power relations, Nelson (1974) refers to such tactics as playing men off against one another, seeking alliance and support from other women, using sorcery (in Chaquia society, for example, men fear women who can divine the future), and using their roles as midwife, ceremonial cook, and religious leader to gain status in their community. In nomadic societies, being a daughter, sister, wife, or mother helps women act as “information brokers” (Nelson 1974:559) who channel information and use it to influence decisions about alliances and marriages. A similar use that women in Arab nomadic societies make of agency of the private is how, as honorable wives (especially through gossip and female networking) they influence their husband’s image in the community, which depends also on his wife’s behavior. In this sense, the women use their most important cultural elements—shame and honor—to gain power and status.

The family is an important arena for agency of the private (Barakat 1993; Hijab 1988; Joseph 1993). Family provides a structure and context through which resources are allocated and distributed, disputes are arbitrated, and behaviors are closely monitored. The family absorbs the material, political, and social resources of the individual and the group. The family in the Middle East is the basic socioeconomic unit for group cohesion and for the individual’s survival under state oppression or in the absence of the state. Individuals protect their position in the family to gain support, legitimacy, and power. In this context, Abu-Lughod (1990) shows how Bedouin women of the Awlad ‘Ali tribe exploit gender inequality within the family and society to influence power relations. They resist by using local traditional forms, such as poetry, hiding knowledge from men, and smoking in secret—forms of resistance indicative of power relations and structures in the Awlad ‘Ali tribe. In this sense, resistance is diagnostic of power:

[O]ne way power is exercised in relation to women is through a range of prohibitions and restrictions which they both embrace, in their support for the system of sexual segregation, and resist, as suggested by the fact

that they fiercely protect the inviolability of their separate sphere, that sphere where the defiances take place. (Abu-Lughod 1990:43)

The common thread in the above-mentioned studies is how women working through traditional norms resist or change situations of unequal power. Tradition legitimates hegemony and reproduces power; it is an active co-opting agent and the most powerful means of social incorporation. In sum, Middle Eastern women use tradition for their empowerment and voice. (Muge and Balaghi 1994).

One aspect of using tradition for empowerment in the public sphere is evident in Singerman's (1995) study of "informal agency" as political participation in Cairo. She argues that because few legal avenues of political participation are accessible to the vast majority of citizens, and because opposition to the state can involve great personal and professional risk, people learn to express their political beliefs in subtle creative ways. Thus, rather than participating in political parties, they form alternative informal political institutions to further their interests and influence the action of their rulers on "bread and butter issues." This "politics of the excluded" (an alternative view of politics) locates power within a wide range of structures and institutions.

Such informal networks exist in the quarters of Cairo where female peddlers (*id-dallalat*) organize extensive networks of women who collect ration cards from neighbors and kin, bribe employees of government food co-operatives, and endure raucous crowds outside co-operatives in densely populated areas in order to obtain large amounts of government-subsidized goods. These illiterate women brokers resell their products at a profit, and through this activity in the community influence government's capacity more than the elites by sabotaging the distribution networks, which are a cornerstone of the government's legitimacy.

The common claim of these studies is that agency is a mode of resistance to power relations driven by the local social structure and gender relations. "The notion of power implied in the concept of the negotiated order is the potential for levying sanctions, the potential for influencing further actions of others (as well as one's own) and the behaviors of others" (Oleson, in Nelson 1974:553-54).

Unlike the women of the present study, Middle Eastern and North African women do not have to surrender any part of their lives to manipulate and resist in public and private spheres. In contrast, the first educated Palestinian Bedouin women adopted conformist behavior at the expense of their emotions and intimate lives in order to keep what they have gained; access to public higher education and employment. Doing so, they emphasize their connective selves (Joseph 1993), sacrificing their own happiness and emotional well-being, giving in to the requirement that they marry within tribal limits regardless of their wishes, in order to fight for social change that allows their continued participation in the public arena and the creation of a second generation of educated Bedouin women in their families and tribes.

#### BEDOUIN WOMEN AS MINORITY GROUP IN ISRAEL

To understand gender power relations in the Palestinian Bedouin context requires knowing women's status. Bedouin male domination is legitimized by two cultural codes

that affect the lives of women: the sexual and the collective. As a vehicle of procreation, a woman is both important and marginalized. Her procreative power makes her the center of home and the bearer of tradition. As such, she is highly protected by Bedouin traditional law, and any offense against her may lead to revenge by her male kin (Abu-Lughod 1998). The need for modesty is reflected in the concept of *tahashum* (shame and self-control), which requires modest dress for girls and women.

The collective code also marginalizes females. The Bedouin woman is required to marry for the sake of the collective rather than her own interest. She is meant to increase the size and power of the group (the extended family). Marriage occurs according to tribal relations and always within tribal limits (Abu-Lughod 1998). In this situation, it is important to examine the lives of the first Bedouin women who dared to initiate social change in their tribes, breaking through tribal limits into the public sphere via education and employment, and then returning to the tribe.

The Negev Bedouins are among the Palestinian Arab people who remained in their country after the 1948 war and today, numbering 140,000, they are part of an ethnic minority in the State of Israel. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Israel government built seven villages for them in the Negev desert in order to resettle them. These villages, called "permanent settlements," were populated by about 50 percent of the Bedouin. The other half remained on their lands in "unrecognized villages" (not marked on any map), in a move considered illegal by the state. These lack basic services such as piped water, electricity, sewage, or schools (Human Rights Watch 2001).

Bedouin schools at first were built from shacks and lacked basic educational facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and teaching equipment. It was not until the late 1970s that two high schools were built in two recognized villages. A very few women from this study went there; the rest attended Arab or Jewish boarding schools in northern Israel, far from patriarchal control. It was not until 1988 that the first female Bedouin was admitted to a university in the Negev region. By 1998, only 12 women had acquired the bachelor's degrees (the author of this paper being one of them). Public employment of Bedouin women began in the 1980s. Thus, like women from other Middle Eastern countries, Bedouin women's entry into the public sphere is new, and was accompanied by struggles within the traditional society.

Before their forced move to the villages, Bedouins practiced agriculture and herding. Men were primarily responsible for guarding the land and receiving visitors, while women did the farming. Thus, men were largely dependent on the decisions and knowledge of their wives in all that concerned the family's livelihood. Women were invested with considerable power in decisions about relations with neighbors and the marriage of daughters (Meir 1997).

However, with the transition to the village, women became socially useless and unproductive in their own domestic space. At the same time, they lacked skills for work outside the house, and the state did not provide an appropriate workplace that embraces Bedouin customs. As a consequence, most of the men work outside the village, while the women stay at home with no vital activity, except as wife and mother.

Settlement in villages has led to a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, Bedouin women are exposed to, but have limited access to, education and labor opportunities that

can provide them with greater involvement in the public sphere. On the other hand, resettlement has caused Bedouin society to abandon its traditional economic structure. Consequently, these women are witnessing changes in family economics that entail their removal from power positions and their growing dependence on men (Lewando-Hundt 1984). This has led to social constraints as the traditional social institutions deteriorate, placing Bedouin women at risk of being left without social supports that previously enabled their well-being and thereby contributed to social stability.

Unlike other ethnic groups throughout the world, Palestinian minorities in Israel, live in geographic spaces separate from the Jewish population (Rabinowitz 2001), and lead lives based on local and cultural norms. Thus, entering the university, located in Jewish-Israeli cities, constitutes entry into a different cultural world. The identity formed as a result of the Bedouin women's encounter with and exposure to what is unfamiliar to them, and the return thereafter to their villages, entail changes in gender identity and feminine self. Studying at a university, in a coeducational campus, constitutes their first experiences in an alien society with its own culture and individualistic inclinations. Exposure to a different lifestyle and culture and acquisition of academic knowledge create complex realities that affect the women's identity profoundly, especially following their return to their villages (Abu-Rabia-Queder 2008).

This article presents the narratives of women who were the first in their tribes to attend institutions of higher learning, including universities, teaching colleges, and nursing schools, and the first to be employed in the public sphere following graduation. Each was the first and only woman from her tribe (in the case of an unrecognized village) or village (in the case of a recognized settlement) to do so, and each had her father's approval at a time when no other man from her tribe or village would even let his daughter complete high school studies.

## METHODOLOGY

This research took a post-positive approach, focusing on narratives that deal with meaning and hermeneutics as part of the interviewee's life story. The narrative stream characterizes the person as someone who creates stories that construct his/her identity; it focuses on the subject's interpretation of his/her life (Bertux and Kohli 1984). Narrative study, recognizing biography as social construction that takes place in different changing social contexts, enables exploring the principles that construct the life story in social and personal contexts (Riessman 1993). Thus the narratives of the first educated Bedouin women reveal how they constructed their lives and identities within multiple spheres.

Stories provide models of the world, and through narrative, reality and experience of the world are viewed and shaped. To tell a story is to "see the world as embodied in the story" (Bruner 2002:25). Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about whom and what we are, and that selfhood is its product. Although self-making is from inside (as memory, feelings, ideas, beliefs and subjectivity) much is also from outside, based on the apparent esteem of others and cultural expectations. Narrative acts of self-making are usually guided by implicit models of what selfhood should and should

not be (Bruner 2002). Furthermore, the stories people tell about themselves and their lives constitute and interpret those lives. Stories also describe the world as it is lived and understood by the storyteller.

This study aims to show not only that acts of conformity are acts of resistance, but also that acts of resistance can be transformed into a story of resistance. Ewick and Silbey (2003:1329) suggest that:

resistance is enabled and collectivized, in part by the circulation of stories narrating moments when taken for granted social structure is exposed. . . . By telling stories of resistance, actors name and thus expose what goes without saying. By narrating those moments when they are able to best power, actors extend temporally and spatially individuals act of resistance.

As an integral part of the narratives, stories of resistance have a recognition of social structure as it operates within transactions. By describing inversions of social structure that achieve a momentary reversal of power, the narratives of resistance reveal the teller's awareness of how opportunities and constraints are embedded in taken-for-granted structures of social action. In constructing narratives of everyday resistance, people express their awareness of unjust authoritative power and announce their understanding of how structure both enables and limits action. Acts of everyday resistance typically go unnoticed, but when they are transformed into a narrative they declare them-selves as resistance (Ewick and Silbey 2003).

Through narrating, the interviewees not only reveal their understanding of power and identity, they also construct legacy and subjectivity. More than a representation of events, the story articulates the structural bases of power: it is a political act making a moral claim on power and stands as a challenge to hegemony. By recalling moments when they face power and relating how they found and exploited cracks in the structure, these women enact and communicate conceptions of self and human agency.

Seventeen women who came from various Bedouin tribes were interviewed.<sup>2</sup> Following the structure outlined by Rosenthal (1993), each interview had two parts. First, participants were asked to tell their life story without my interference. Then, specific questions were aimed at learning more about parts of their lives. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, each lasting about three hours. The stories of the interviewees were analyzed holistically, where some parts are interpreted by other parts of the narrative (Lieblich et al. 1998). I focused on content (what happened) and underlying motives (hidden) (see Rosenthal 1993).

The narratives have the multiple dimensions of conformity in public and the inner lives of the first-educated women. Showing conformity, they used different strategies to fulfill their educational and employment ambitions. But fulfillment in the public sphere was at the expense of the personal sphere: conformity became more essential as public achievements rose, exacting a high personal price of emotional surrender. This is illustrated in three categories of relevant practice: conformity in behavior, conformity through patriarchy, and conformity of emotions.

## CONFORMITY IN PERSONAL BEHAVIOR

Five types of personal conformist behaviors were adopted by first educated women to cope with their situation: passivity/silence, passive resemblance, restraint, role modeling, and putting on an act.

*Passivity and Silence: The Invisible Female Student*

Safa, a married woman in her 40s and a mother of four, was the first in her tribe to attend high school and study in an institute of higher learning. After graduation, she was a teacher in the village school, and after a few years vied for a higher position typically held by Bedouin men. Every step of the way was a struggle for Safa. To meet her goals, she used conformity in various ways. Passivity enabled her to gain acceptance by Bedouin society and pursue her studies. She described her passive behavior as “[I was] quiet, listening to the lecture, taking notes, writing exams, succeeding, and returning home.” Her behavior was simply to follow directions: “When I went to high school, I was required to be a quiet girl, an honorable girl, according to them, the girl who does not ask, just sits.” Being an honorable woman means acting according to feminine norms: being passive, hidden, and unseen. Safa describes the path she and other educated Bedouin women were forced to take as “full of thorns and we walked on those thorns and suffered.”

As a personal price paid for such conformity, she was forced to suppress her inner self. “I imprisoned many things that were in my personality for a long time. I was like a machine, going to lectures, taking notes, it was not my real personality.” But, according to Safa, the price was well worth it, because of the change it brought for Bedouin women to allow them to study: Hiba affirms this change: “After me, they all went to study. I opened the door to other girls from my village, especially to my sisters. They registered for university, and no one resisted; they accepted it quietly.”

*Passive Resemblance: Succumbing to Bedouin Norms*

Tamara, a single woman in her 50s and schoolteacher, was the first Bedouin woman from her village to attend high school. Since there were no secondary schools in her village or in any Bedouin villages in the area, with her father’s approval she studied at a Jewish boarding high school in a nearby city. When she returned to her village, she became its first female teacher.

At first, Tamara found it difficult adjusting to school life: “I studied in a Jewish school. Those things [common to a Bedouin school] were never part of it. When I returned to Bedouin life, I found everything—teaching style, methods, books—all was different, all was strange to me.” Raised according to wholly different norms (“In Bedouin schools there was a lot of violence”), she felt no sense of belonging. Nor did she find a social place for herself. “I didn’t go to anyone’s home.” Her uncles thought she should stop teaching because her public appearance brought shame:

One day when I was teaching, a man from another tribe stood near my classroom window, staring at me and trying to flirt with me. The vice principal saw him and came to remove him from the school grounds. They started to fight, until both were bleeding. I went home and said nothing to my father, because I was afraid of the tribal fights that might erupt. In the evening, the man's family sent people to my father to apologize for hurting his [daughter's] honor. When my uncles learned about this story, they went insane, saying to my father: "Are you happy now? Your daughter brings shame and you don't know about it? Do you need more proof? She must stop teaching."

Nonetheless, after explaining to her father what had happened, Tamara continued to work at the school, with her father's approval.

Tamara's conformity was to act as Bedouin society expects so as to ease feelings of strangeness, yet this also caused her to regress (*rojoa'ia*; i.e., to be primitive), as she calls it. She described a painful situation of adhering to Bedouin school norms that she finds unacceptable: "In all honesty, I want to tell you, I taught one year and I started to hit [the students], just like [the other teachers]. I got used to it. I started to see things like them and be like them, I became them." This return to a "primitive" mentality was imposed on her by the supervision of patriarchy, which seemed to control her almost against her will, and without her even being aware of it:

I feel like every Bedouin watches you wherever you go and wherever you come from, and it has affected me a lot. I feel like I only teach and go back home. At first, it was enough for me, I started to go backwards with them, to go back to their norms. . . . It was not the life I lived in high school or among the Jews. . . . Life has changed and it affects a person without him noticing it. I never used to cover my head. I never used to wear traditional dress. Today, I started to pray, I never prayed before. I always wore pants.

Tamara has turned into a passive individual. As a painful strategy for coping with controlling mechanisms, Tamara adopted the cultural feminine self, particularly the religious self perceived in Bedouin society as the woman's honorable self. Adopting this accepted feminine conformity allowed her to continue work as a teacher.

*Restraint: "When you Keep Things Inside, You Win"*

Similar to the strategies used during their years of schooling, as working women these women adopted restraint as a means for having their new status accepted in society. For instance, Hiba, who strove to be her village school principal, used damage control to minimize the threat she was to the men, who verbally abused her. She restrained herself to be accepted by society, challenging them silently in order to win the job:

Thank God, I restrained myself. I did not react to offensive words, not even words that hurt girls [i.e., that attacked their honor]. One man who opposed my getting the position blocked my way with his car, opened his window, and started yelling offensive words at me. I stood still until he left, I went on without reacting.

Through the restraint she imposed on herself, Hiba denied the presence of her adversary, and when her parents inquired, she denied it ever happened. She explains her behavior rationally. She is aware that in Bedouin society a woman maintaining her honor and modesty wins: "If you react, sometimes you can dirty yourself and spoil things for



yourself. I keep a lot of things inside. Sometimes when you keep things inside, you win, and, in fact, I beat this man.” Indeed, after she became principal, the same man registered his children in the school and apologized to her. Her strategy succeeded in the long term: “Today, people who reproached me have changed their perception of me. I see the people who were resistant as my supporters.” Professional Bedouin women who did break female norms in their work often suffered harsh consequences, as shown in the following story.

Majeda, a social worker in her 40s, married with three sons, chose to act against tribal norms and endured threats to herself and her family:

A battered woman came to me asking for help. She did not want to go the police, but I encouraged her to do so. When the ambulance came, they took her to the hospital in front of her husband. Afterwards, her tribe started to threaten my family and also myself. They sent an old woman to hit me in the clinic. It was not nice to threaten my parents, the only thing I worried about was the threat to my children. I did not tell them so they would not be frightened. But I did not regret what I did. What was important to me was that this woman would not be hurt any more.

In challenging tribal norms, Majeda was aware of the possible consequences. She knew the cultural map of Bedouin society, and that vengeance is not individual but collective, and so might target her parents or children and not necessarily herself. Majeda chose not to act in accordance with the Bedouin cultural script and paid a price for it. Such deviant behavior and its outcome shows how much the politics of conformity is needed, especially in the professional arena, and how much behavior in keeping with the cultural script is necessary in order to create change and acceptance of the working female in the Bedouin culture.

*Role Model: Dealing with the Threatening Sphere*

Another expression of conformity is how educated women became role models for other women by their morality and showing that it is possible to study and work in the public arena without violating the Bedouin feminine model. Thus, by adopting expected forms of Bedouin behavior, these women gained the right to lead social change.

One of the meaningful experiences of women who serve as role models is sacrifice for the sake of others. As Khulod, a married social worker in her 40s and mother of three describes it: “I used to cause myself a lot of pain. I gave up a lot of things so I can be a model Bedouin girl, so other parents will give their daughters a chance.”

One way of being a positive role model is by wearing modest dress. Tova, age 30, a single woman and a nurse, said: “From my second year at university, I put my scarf on from the front. Before that, I used to wear it from the back. . . . From my second year, I was religiously committed.” By “commitment” Tova refers to covering her neck according to religious code, which goes beyond traditional obligations. Tova thereby conformed through her feminine religious self, which is highly respected among Bedouins.

The women also try to be models of honorable Bedouin women in their work environment. Because their entrance into the public sphere is threatening to their community,

they try to smooth their way by using their status as role models. In that context, they also take care not to cross forbidden boundaries, which could cause them to be ostracized. Rim explains:

If I am a leader socially, and people ask you for advice in your work, they approach me as a model sometimes. If I address certain issues, this model is "burnt." Even if these people believe in you and in your thoughts, they will distance themselves from you, and I don't want to reach this situation.

Thus, she refrains from discussing issues that might be controversial, like birth control. In referring to her image as a role model, Rim likens herself to the prophets that sacrificed themselves for society:

Even the prophets, when they reached a state where their lives were in danger, because of the mission they undertook . . . even the Prophet Muhammad moved from Mecca to Medina [and thus gave up being a role model].

As a consequence, women who lead not only become role models, the change itself motivates others. Raya, a single social worker, age 30, explains:

Maybe the fact that I came from a conservative home, that my father allowed me to go to university, surprised the tribe. And it encouraged them. They thought, "If she could go study and nothing happened to her, why can't we?" They saw that I came to no harm. My brother used to take me to the main road, and I waited for the bus to take me. Sometimes I got home at 10 o'clock at night. My father used to wait for me and bring me home.

The women's narratives are reminiscent of what Mahmood (2001) perceives as norms that reflect women's subordination, but also serve as agency. Mahmood quotes an Egyptian woman who talks about how external enactments of piety produce the inner feelings appropriate to that state:

It's like the veil. In the beginning when you wear it, you are embarrassed and don't want to wear it because people say you look older and unattractive . . . but you must wear the veil, first because it's God's command and then with time, your insides learn to feel shy without the veil, and if you were to take it off, your entire being feels uncomfortable about it. (Mahmood 2001:216)

This example illustrates how action does not issue forth from natural feelings, but rather creates those feelings. It is through repeated bodily acts that one trains one's memory, desire and intellect to behave according to establishment standards of conduct. These acts—wearing the veil, acting honorably, being a role model—serve not as manipulative masks in a game of public presentation, detachable from an essential interiorized self, but are rather the critical markers, as well as the intellectual means, by which one trains oneself to be pious (Mahmood 2001:218). This also shows how the body makes the self, where behavior constitutes both the potential and the means through which inferiority is realized.

Mahmood's analysis of shyness and veiling reveals that at stake in these symbolic practices is not merely regulation of the feminine body by male religious authority, but the very concepts through which the mind and body are articulated in shaping the disciplined self. In the Bedouin women's case, engendering the disciplined self

generates their agency and allows their continued access to education and public employment.

*Putting On an Act: Living a Double Life*

Some of the women who left their tribes and villages for study in the university, exposing them for the first time to Israeli culture, returned to tribal male-controlling mechanisms. They experienced dual worlds and the cultural conflict this generates. Such an experience raises the question of where one belongs. At the start of her university studies, Shahira experienced an identity crisis: “Am I like my mother, father, or am I some-thing else? If I am something new, am I new to them? Do I still belong to them, or do I have no connection to them?” As a result of this dilemma, Fadia explains, some women gave in to Bedouin norms:

In order to resolve this conflict, some women chose a way of adjusting to social [Bedouin] demands, giving up the part of their personality that is problematic in society’s perception. I see many cases where the women throw everything away and become just as society wants. I can understand them.

Not all women adopt this strategy; some prefer to live in harmony with both worlds by adapting their behavior to each context. Thus, they deal with the dilemma by acting a different role in each society, living a double life. Fadia explains: “I say a Bedouin woman lives with two faces. . . . It is like being a schizophrenic. In a certain place, you act like this, in another, you act like that.” As this strategy helps them fulfill their wishes in both cultures, they see it as a form of coping rather than submissiveness. However, it is not easy to straddle both worlds, as Narjes points out:

I have lived these two lives [Bedouin and Israeli] and I’ve had difficulties, with one leg here, one leg there. You want to keep the traditional norms of your society, even though you believe, as an educated woman, they are wrong, but you must go along with [Bedouin] society and you feel yourself living two personalities. I, Narjes, the educated woman, who believes in certain values that are not wrong and do not contradict any society or any value, I have to follow [Bedouin norms] because for [Bedouin] society they are right. . . . So I have forced myself to live as a very traditional Bedouin girl, so society will treat me with respect according to its values, and so I can simultaneously live the life I want and believe in.

Encountering new cultural values creates dilemmas for the women as to what they could adopt and what they should give up. This positioned them between the will to fulfill their autonomous choices and the cultural demands that forbid them. In response, they developed a hybrid identity (Bhabha 1994) that incorporated within their new educated feminine self the accepted feminine self of Bedouin culture, allowing them to fulfill their ambitions in the Jewish sphere while continuing to belong to their own society. The hybridity is a consequence of integration between the two worlds they live in. It is a self that contains different contradictions and pain.

*Conformity through Patriarchy*

The coping strategies described above depend on the women themselves and are their responses to the limits imposed on them. Another category of strategies entails adopting external features that depend on patriarchy. Arab society is often described as patriarchal and its nature as connective. Joseph (1993) defines patriarchy as the privileging of males and seniors and the mobilization of kinship structure, morality, and idioms to legitimate and institutionalize gendered and aged domination.

By connective patriarchy, I mean relationships in which a person's boundaries are relatively fluid so that persons feel a part of significant others . . . they anticipate each other's needs, expect their needs to be anticipated by significant others, and often shape their likes and dislikes in accordance with the likes and dislikes of the others (Joseph 1993:452).

In a society in which the person achieves meaning through family and community, and survival depends upon integration with family and community, connective relations are not merely functional, but necessary for social existence (Joseph 1993:453).

Thus, a patriarchal structure that controls women can be viewed in this context as enabling, as social control can be a space for negotiation. The support of a male in the patriarchal structure helps these women in their struggle to gain and maintain access to education and employment. He can shield women in the face of social limitations, not unlike the case of other Arab women in the Middle East and in Israel in particular (Abu-Rabia-Queder 2006; Abu-Baker 1998).

Earlier research generally depicted the Arab woman's father as a passive supporter of his daughter's education. In the current study, each father had to join in his daughter's struggle, even when he himself was not in favor of her wish to study. For when the daughter does so without approval from society and without there being other girls who do as she does, it is her father who takes the blame. In some cases, the father was even willing to be ostracized and denied membership in the family. Ruaida, a teacher in her 50s, married with four children, said: "My father stopped being loved. Even when he passed by people or when he said 'Hello' to people, they did not answer him."

Rabab, a teacher in her 40s, married and having three children, had the unusual support of an oldest brother to study, which she greatly appreciates:

Today there are no men like my brother. Where are all Bedouin men who support their daughters? Today, there are many female students, but in my time, my brother used to take me to the university in the morning, bring me back and also gave me an allowance when I got married.

The importance of fathers supporting their daughters to enter the public sphere is also seen in the West among pioneer educated women in the nineteenth century. The few women who succeeded in entering male professions, such as medicine and engineering, succeeded because of their father's or husband's support, as most men then resisted women's entry into the public sphere (Charlton 1999).

The importance of the father testifies to the connective nature of Bedouin patriarchy, as in other Middle Eastern societies, and especially to the female connective self in Arab culture, which is a "relational self" where people experience themselves as "part of

significant others” (Joseph 1999:83). The women in this study are deeply grateful to their fathers for their having higher education at a time when this was not permitted in the Bedouin community. Their fathers were more than significant others, they were the very people who allowed them to challenge a forbidden norm. These women’s responsibility to others is part of their relational self that perceives their access to learning and employment not merely as an individual achievement, but also as a collective responsibility to other women.

*Conformity of Emotions: “I Killed My Feelings”*

While different strategies and forms of familial support allowed the Bedouin women to fulfill their academic and professional dreams, this was not the case with their emotional lives. An important theme in their narratives is that expressions of the individual self—feelings of love, romantic love, and the possibility of choosing one’s mate (Giddens 1992; Illuoz and Wilf 2004)—clashed with cultural prohibitions. Individual feelings endanger accepted marital patterns, and threaten to unravel the collective tribal structure of Bedouin society, which is based on solidarity and on a distinction between tribes of different statuses. Thus, following their hearts posed a threat far greater than that entailed in gaining an education or obtaining employment.

These women are tragic heroes, in the sense that they were forced to surrender the possibility of experiencing love for the sake of satisfying the family or tribe. The price of their freedom to study and work was to sacrifice that which was most precious to them.<sup>3</sup> They would not enter into romantic relationships in order to avoid hurting significant others who gave them their freedom. Wishing a love from forbidden tribes stems from their individual selves, but sacrificing a forbidden love to spare their fathers and brothers yet another tribal battle stems from their connective selves.

Safa, for instance, fell in love with a man who was outside the tribal limits. There was a point where she was ready to give in to her love and run away with him, but she changed her mind at the last minute when she realized the consequences of this action. She knew that, as the first woman from her village to study at a university, she set a precedent for other women. If she were to have eloped, people would think that higher education for women leads to forbidden behavior, and this would bring shame on the family. Moreover, it could hurt her sisters’ chance to study: “I could do anything, anything, but inside me was a deterrence, between me and myself, that I don’t want to hurt anyone from my family. I don’t want people to gossip about me, because then my parents could be hurt, my sisters could be affected.”

She married another man: “I once called it ‘killing,’ I killed my feelings so I can be strong in his eyes.” She gave up her love for the sake of higher values in the eyes of society. She described her lost love through a story of a girl who wanted to elope with her lover, but as she left her house, she brushed her father’s robe, and started talking to the robe, saying: “I try so hard not to make you dirty, I clean you so you won’t be dirty, but today you are going to be dirty, because what I am about to do will make you dirty.” In short, she cannot go through with it, as it would “dirty” her father’s name and honor.

Kifah, age 40 and married with four children, related how in her teen years she fell in love with a man from a “forbidden” tribe: “I always saw this relation as something that would never be fulfilled. Maybe if someone would have helped me, I would not have given up, but the difficulties began because I wanted something that was forbidden. It was like a fire that you must not get close to.” Despite the secrecy of this love relation, she explains why it was difficult for her to leave him: “If I could find someone better, maybe I would have married him, but in my time there were no educated men at all.” However, she could not marry the man she loved, because it was forbidden and she did not want to put her father in conflict with his own tribe: “He gave me more freedom than others, he gave me all the freedom I wanted, so I could not disappoint him. He would have to fight a whole tribe, and only because of me. I couldn’t do it to him, so I gave up.” Instead, she looked for a spouse who would give her freedom and support.

The enormous price exacted is beyond agency. Pain may be viewed in relation to forms of agency (Mahmoud 2001). In this sense, agency is a capacity to endure as it is a capacity for progressive change, but also a capacity to suffer and persist, a concept Mahmoud (2001) relates to the Muslim ideal of *Sabr*. Bedouin women accept pain in order to maintain a dimension of their connectivity: to enable other Bedouin girls to have higher education and to avoid hurting significant others who supported their freedom.

## DISCUSSION

The narratives of this study unveil a dialogue between subject and culture. Culture is enacted through the agency of individuals, and woman’s selves are formed through agency and affected by culture. Moreover, agency has its limitations when it threatens the social structure. The women of this study are social agents.

To be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform these social relations to some degree. Agents are empowered to act with and against others by structures; they have knowledge of schemes that inform social life and have access to some measure of human and non-human resources. (Sewell 1992:20)

The first educated Bedouin women use their human resources—their cultural knowledge of the desired feminine self in Bedouin society, their emotional commitment to their community and significant others, like their father’s support (Sewell 1992:9)—to negotiate their access to education and employment through conformity.

Identities are formed and lived in and through activity, and they develop in social practice. Improvised from the cultural resources at hand, they are important bases from which people create new ways of being. Thus, identities are possibilities for mediating agency (Holland et al. 2001). The Bedouin women’s selves revealed in this study trace their participation, and particularly their agency, in socially produced, culturally constructed activities.

Going one step further, the formation of a connective selfhood is a crucial part of agency for these women as it enables them to create a change in social relations. By silencing their experiences, needs, and passions, they show the community that they are

not threatening the image of the accepted cultural feminine self. Adopting a connective self, they are loyal not only to the significant others who helped give them the freedom to study and work, but also to their ethos, by which they are also connected to the wider social groups of kin and community. The community closely watches their steps and especially those of their fathers who challenged the social order for their daughters' sake. Thus, the women feel obliged to the entire community; as their behavior reflects not only on their own honorable status, but also that of their fathers.

This connective selfhood is extremely acute for the women in the intimate sphere, where it exacts a heavy emotional toll. In this area, they accept self hurt in another dimension of their connectivity, and thereby enable Bedouin girls to access higher education. Through conformity, the women transform the forbidden norm of an educated woman into a permitted status, allowing for the creation of a second generation of educated women. They change the community from one that is resistant to women studying to a supportive community without undermining Bedouin culture.

Notwithstanding the cost, these women's connective behavior is part of the "politics of conformity," a strategy for progress and a symbol of their power, understood as "the ability to achieve foreseen and intended effects in social interaction" (Wrong, quoted in Ewick and Silbey 2003:1333). Thus, power is not a thing that can be possessed, but rather a series of transactions whose consequences are contingent upon the contributions of all parties, including those with more and less power.

To achieve this power, the Bedouin women used both primary and secondary power resources. The primary power resources are the cultural means they control, such as their behavior in the public arena and in the emotional sphere. By appropriating different cultural roles and rules through daily practice, their behaviors are acts of resistance that are part of structure and power relations. Secondary power resources are the Bedouin women's use of their fathers' support. The Middle Eastern literature views father figures, as the primary holders of power and the main source of change, particularly as it is they who enabled the women to study and work. But I argue that it is these women's conformist/disciplined behavior and their symbolic role modeling (rooted in their fathers' support) that causes social change and makes possible a second generation of education Bedouin women. While there is no doubt that fathers are central in these women's lives, it was the women's conformist behavior that actually created the change. Indeed, if the women who were permitted to study had not repaid their fathers with behavior that did not violate their honor, it is unlikely that they would have earned their fathers' continuing support in the public sphere.

The debt to their fathers is evinced in the women's emotional sacrifices. As women who received support from their fathers, often in the face of strong resistance, they chose to surrender their emotions and love in exchange for the freedom to work and study and to spare their fathers a second struggle with society. In fact, it is this very aspect of their agency that reveals the limitations of their power. While these women have succeeded in generating a historical change by paving the way for a second generation of educated Bedouin women, this change is directed only at the public educational and professional spheres; their power stops in the most painful, private area—the emotions. Despite all the power of their agency, they still lack the ability to choose a spouse outside the

permitted limits. Here, where their fathers' support could help them create social change that would spare them the sacrifice of happiness and emotional well-being, they chose to abandon the struggle in the most prohibited place for change, for such marriages threaten the social structure of Bedouin society and tribal hierarchy. Thus, agency, too, has its limits.

Sewell (1992:4) claims that "the conception of 'knowledgeable' and 'enabled' implies that those agents are capable of putting their structurally formed capacities to work in creative ways. Their action may have the consequence of transforming the very structures that gave them the capacity to act." The meaning of this in the present context is that in the public sphere women received legitimacy to study and work, and even help create a second generation of educated women, so long as the tribal structure remained intact. But the women stopped short of activating their agency on the intimate-emotional level, in the area of forbidden love and taboo marriages, which could break apart the tribal structure by tearing down tribal boundaries. In this sense, their conformist behavior goes beyond agency, and constitutes a form of surrender and self-sacrifice for the sake of maintaining the social structure, but primarily to refrain from harming those human resources (i.e., fathers) who provided them with rare support, enabling them to study and work and to change cultural and structural power relations for themselves and for the good of Bedouin women.

## NOTES

1. I thank Lila Abu-Lughod for reading a previous version of this paper.
2. Since all interviewees are first generation educated women of Bedouin society in southern Israel, they are easily recognizable. Thus, information about their names, ages, marital status, number of children and professions is kept to a minimum to protect their anonymity.
3. Bedouin young women, as students of higher education, came into contact with young men from different tribes, which led to strong feelings of romance.

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