

What Makes Israeli Women Sick?: Maternity, Modesty and Militarism in Israeli Society

By Susan Sered, University Press of New England, 2000, 194 pp.

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Recent years have witnessed an extraordinary explosion in feminist and social oriented literature on 'the body' in society. The main concern of this discourse has been 'to bring the body into' social theory. Susan Sered's *What Makes Israeli Women Sick?* with its focus on women's bodies in a local context, is a timely contribution to this newly emerging literature. Although there is little reference in the book to recent years' extensive theoretical discourse on women's corporeal experience, the book is clearly informed by some of the focal concerns of this discourse. Such for example is Sered's explicit concern to account not only for public policy and public discourses 'about' women's bodies but also for "the voices and experiences of individual women" (p. 19). This dual concern, which is threaded throughout the five chapters of the book, is expressed in the central role that Sered accords to legal, political, religious and commercial discourses on the one hand, and to 'corporeal experiences' and 'resisting bodies' on the other.

The book, as Sered declares in the introduction, sets out to bring together two arguments: the first one is that "patriarchy makes women sick" and the second is that "Jewish Israeli forms of patriarchy make Jewish Israeli women sick in particular ways" (p. 19). While both arguments locate Sered's work in the context of feminist medical sociology and anthropology, it is within the latter that the book offers a unique contribution to this body of knowledge. The focus on versatile 'local' discourses - from military service, fertility and motherhood to mikveh rituals, wig wearing and local icons (such as Pnina Rosenblum)- provides valuable insights into the significance of 'the body' in religious-national-gendered discourses.

The title of the book is somewhat misleading. The question posed in the book's title receives a general answer composed of the three sacred M's- maternity, modesty and militarism, coupled with the argument that Israeli Jewish women have 'responsibility without authority'. However, these propositions remain in the background and are not supported by the empirical discussion, which seems to be engaged more with diverse corporeal discourses and experiences, and less with causal arguments or 'sickness' practices. Thus the strength of the book does not lie in its ability to 'explain' 'what makes Israeli women

sick?’ or why Israeli women are “sicker and die younger than their counterparts in other western countries” (p. 1). The strength of the book is rather in its pioneering attempt ‘to map’, not necessarily in a systematic way, different arenas, institutions and discourses shaping Jewish Israeli women’s corporeal experience.

The book is composed of five chapters, addressing an eclectic cluster of gendered discourses and ‘corporeal experiences’. These include ‘the demographic problem’ (chapter one), ‘maternal experience, experiences of infertility and breast feeding’ (chapter two), ‘military practices’ (chapter three), Jewish religious concepts and practices such as those related to ‘nida’ and ‘mikveh’ rituals (chapter four), and the ‘scrutinized body’ in mass media and in Jewish religious discourses, concluding with a brief discussion on anorexia (chapter five). Throughout the book there is a comprehensive use of sources from recent years’ anthropological, sociological and statistical studies related to gendered corporeality in Israel, as well as ‘primary sources’ including interviews, ethnographic accounts and various popular texts, mainly daily newspapers. The fifth chapter (addressing consumption discourses and ‘the scrutinized body’) adds a unique contribution to the existing literature on gender discourses in Israel, arguing that “what is singularly Israeli [in] the construction of the beautiful consumer-consumerable body coexists with deeply embedded Jewish religious discourses of female corporeality” (p. 124). The book does not offer an ‘empirically systematic’ discussion, but it does open an important agenda for future works on aesthetics and power in a local context, though the concluding discussion on anorexia as ‘the ultimate case of scrutiny and control of women’s bodies’ reads as suggestive but somewhat detached from the former parts of the chapter.

In terms of its structure, the book is organized around what Sered views as “the major institutions that shape Israeli women’s corporeal experience” (p. 19). These include: “motherhood, the media and consumer economy, the IDF, the Knesset and the religious establishment”. It is not made clear what rationale led to this particular ordering of institutions and the exclusion of others. This, perhaps, opens the door for further work to be done on other institutionalized discourses, within which and towards which corporeal experiences are constructed (for instance, labor market, education and so forth). The same applies for the exclusion of ‘non-Jewish’ Israeli women. Although it is not made clear in the title of the book, it is in fact *Jewish* Israeli women with whom Sered is concerned. Arab women’s corporeal experiences are, for the most part, mentioned with reference to demographic and statistical concerns. This leaves space for further, much needed, work on the subject of cross-religious / cross-ethnic / cross-national aspects of women’s corporeal experience.

Another important contribution of the book lies in its political discussion of ‘discursive power’ on the one hand and ‘corporeal resistance’ on the other.

Here, Sered takes, at least explicitly, a dualistic stance. Throughout the book it is important to her to show how “medical, religious, military, economic and state institutions engage in multifarious projects of collusion and competition to control women’s bodies’ [and that] “in Israeli culture women’s bodies are constructed as symbolic capitals or resources to be fought over and battlegrounds to be fought on” (p. 155). Yet, at the same time, she also shows that “women do sometimes transform themselves from symbol to agent [and practice] corporeal resistance” (pp. 155, 161). Examples vary from ultra-orthodox women’s usage of fashionable clothes and glamorous wigs, to mothers of soldiers resisting militarization through somatic symptom and many others. Yet it seems that Sered herself is not entirely convinced of the ‘benefits’ of stressing women’s ability to transcend repressive institutions and discourses. Despite the declarative dualism, the overall tone of the book seems to support ‘repressive’ rather than ‘resistive’ hypotheses. This is shown both in the meta-argument about patriarchal discourses *making* women sick (or shaping their experiences), as well as in the passive presentation of women’s bodies as being *militarized*, *ritualized* and *scrutinized*. This, again, opens an important agenda for further theoretical discussion on this significant issue.

To summarize, ‘*What Makes Israeli Women Sick?*’ is an interesting and important contribution to our understanding of women’s bodies in the context of local discourses. It comes across as an intriguing text, opening an agenda for further, much needed, work on the centrality of the gendered body in different settings within the Israeli context