

26. The Schizophrenic Reality of Israeli Women: A Cinematic Perspective, 2014

Orit Kamir

Preface

This chapter offers a perspective on the status of Israeli women in 2014. Rather than present the standard review of women's rights in the public and private spheres, the extent of their sexual victimization and their status in politics, the workplace and academia, the chapter explores Israeli women's contemporary cinema and follows the themes and critiques raised by it. This way I introduce you, simultaneously, to Israeli women's realities, as experienced and critically portrayed by Israeli women filmmakers, as well as to women's cinema in contemporary (2014) Israel. Finally, I offer a theoretical feminist perspective on Israeli gender construction that may frame the movies' portrayal and critique of Israeli women's lives.

"Women's movies" were never a significant constituent of Israel's movie industry; at least not until 2014. In the course of this year, audiences were introduced to six new Israeli feature movies written and/or directed by women, focusing on Israeli women's lives and expressing powerful feminist critique:¹ *Six Acts*,² *Zero Motivation*, *She Is Coming Home*, *That Lovely Girl*, *Self Made* and *Gett: The Trial of Vivian Amsalem*. Four of the six enjoyed very high public visibility as well as critical acclaim. Written in 2014, this chapter presents and discusses five of these movies,³ offering a conceptual framework that may illuminate and enhance their social critique.⁴

Any non-Israeli watching these six feminine-feminist movies would likely suppose that they reflect two distinct societies. One (depicted in *That Lovely Girl*, *Six Acts*, *Zero Motivation*, *She Is Coming Home* and *Self Made*) is a 21st-century liberal society, in which women enjoy formal equality and liberty and struggle with Israeli versions of gender predicaments typical of contemporary Western societies (sexual abuse; insidious employment discrimination, such as sophisticated glass ceiling;

¹ According to Wikipedia, 38 movies were commercially released in Israel in 2014, 12 of them directed by women.

² *Six Acts* was produced in 2012 and released in the course of 2013, but only reached Israeli cinemas in the course of 2014.

³ Shira Gefen's movie compares a Jewish Israeli woman's life to that of a Muslim Palestinian woman's. The scope of the chapter does not permit me to consider this movie and the important topic it raises. I therefore do not present it and merely mention it in the final section.

⁴ As this chapter was written in 2014, no academic analysis of any of these movies was available.

persisting patriarchal gender stereotypes; and, in *Self Made*, the double burden of being a woman and a member of a conservative Muslim minority in a liberal Western state). The other society (depicted in *Gett*) is one that adheres to bluntly traditional, patriarchal norms, interpreted and upheld by explicitly conservative, all-male, religious institutions. For an innocent onlooker, it is hard to grasp that the women portrayed in all six movies are members of a single society; that the two seemingly distinct social realities not merely exist in Israel, but both apply to the very same Israeli women. For most Israelis, this extreme duality is so obvious that it is completely transparent; they cannot imagine a different socio-legal reality.

This inconceivable duality and the schizophrenic existential condition it imposes on Israeli women is, in my mind, Israel's greatest gender predicament.⁵ Through Israel's 2014 women's movies this chapter presents this conundrum, pointing to the underlying national-religious socio-cultural structure that upholds it. I rely on the six mentioned movies to illustrate my argument and reinforce it. I begin by addressing the specific gender concerns that each of the movies portrays and calls attention to, and continue to discuss the deep rift presented by the aggregate, between the liberal and the patriarchal aspects of Israeli society; the free and the subordinated aspects of Israeli women's existential condition.

Sexual objectification and abuse: *Six Acts* and *That Lovely Girl*

Keren Yedaya's *That Lovely Girl* did not enjoy the huge popularity of the other 2014 women's movies. This is hardly surprising, given that the movie features an incestuous relationship between a sadistic father (Tzahi Grad) and his 22-year-old dependent daughter, Tammy (Maayan Turgeman). Based on an autobiography by an Israeli woman writer who calls herself Shez, the movie exposes its audience to the stifling reality of a young woman imprisoned in a tormenting relationship with a dominant, self-centered father. He loves, degrades, pampers, attacks, torments, controls and rapes her regularly. He is the exclusive center of her confined world. She is completely devoted to him, fears him, is torn with jealousy when he sees other women, and expresses her frustration, humiliation and self-hatred in bouts of bulimia and self-cutting. Attempting to escape her imprisonment, she "allows" a group of nice young men on the beach to have serial intercourse with her. Her hopeless attempt to establish a life away from his reach, with the help of a kindly female stranger, is

⁵ This is of course not the case for women who belong to cultural minorities that do not partake in the country's liberal norms. Most Palestinian Israeli women (like one of the two protagonists of *Self Made*), ultra-Orthodox Jewish women, Bedouin women, Druze women and Jewish women from the Caucasus are among those. This chapter focuses on the majority of Israeli women, who are, for the most part, Jewish, not ultra-Orthodox, of European, North-American or Middle Eastern origins.

doomed to fail; he is the home she longs to come back to. Relentlessly trapping the viewer in enclosed spaces, the movie offers no explanations, insights, or hope.⁶

There is no reason to think that incestuous abuse, its manifestations and results, are any different in Israel than elsewhere.⁷ The painful *Seder* meal in Moshe and Tammy's home could have been a Christmas one. In the 21st century, Israeli public discourse on this topic has developed subtlety and nuance. Israel's mainstream is increasingly exposed to reports of incestuous exploitation and to its disastrous results, including victims' self-destructive patterns of conduct, such as anorexia and bulimia, self-cutting, alcohol and drug abuse, and dangerous sexual conduct that often ends in repeat victimization. *Six Acts* seems to pick up where *That Lovely Girl* leaves off, focusing on a teenager whose low self-esteem and apparent self-destructiveness play into male adolescents' need to practice sexual conquest. *That Lovely Girl's* gang rape on the beach is the theme developed in detail in *Six Acts*.

Written by Rona Segal and directed by Jonathan Gurfinkel (both young filmmakers), *Six Acts* unfolds how a teenager's desperate longing to feel accepted by her upper-class schoolmates, results in her systematic sexual abuse by a group of these "good boys." New in a Herzliya high school, 16-year-old Gilli (Sivan Levy) is aching to make friends. To her chagrin, hers is a middle-class family in a *nouveau riche* neighborhood, equipped with private swimming pools, fancy cars, I-phones, expensive clothes and frequent travel abroad. Half consciously Gilli offers one of the "coolest" guys in her class the single thing of value that she feels she owns: her body. His close friend, Omri (Eviatar Mor), boldly demands his share of the action, and Gilli finds herself passed from one adolescent to the next, her worth decreasing with every sexual interaction. Clutching on to her desperate hope and self-delusion, Gilli pretends to welcome the sexual encounters and resorts to alcohol and provocative conduct. This merely "justifies" the boys' disrespectful demeanor and the other girls' condemnation and distancing. Parents and teachers seem to see no evil, hear none and certainly say naught. The poignant film captures the banality of abuse and downward spiral, and the cynical cruelty of liberal societies' sanctification of "choice," "consent," "agency," "self-determination" and "sexual liberty." It well deserved the many awards bestowed on it both in Israel and internationally.

In many ways, *Six Acts* – like *That Lovely Girl* – addresses universalistic themes, and, as noted by many reviewers, could have been set in any neo-capitalistic consumer society in the world. Simultaneously, it is thoroughly Israeli in its realistic – almost documentary – depiction of youth in an affluent Israeli community (Her-

⁶ For a detailed analysis (in Hebrew) of this movie, see Pavel Otin, August 22, 2014, http://srita.net/2014/08/22/that_lovely_girl_review/, accessed November 15, 2014.

⁷ Finkelhor 1994; Pereda et al. 2009; Lewis Herman and Hirschman 1981.

zliya), as well as in its commentary on family and group dynamics and gender relations in the upper Israeli echelons.

Much like the men in Tom Topor and Jonathan Kaplan's *The Accused* (1988), the adolescents in *Six Acts* commit sexual abuse pressured by their peers and the prevailing dictates of "masculinity." Each of them feels compelled to prove to his cohorts that he is as manly as the next guy, and that he too can conquer and penetrate the available female. This, of course, comes at the expense of a vulnerable, lonely, very young woman, who, encouraged by liberal conventions, presents herself as sexually active, willing and desiring. The young men treat her as a sexual object through which they can flaunt their "masculinity" and establish hierarchical status amongst themselves. As an object, the more "used" she is, the less desirable. The adults on screen, mostly the boys' parents, wish to seem liberal and cool much like their sons. Due to liberal acceptance of Gilli's "sexual conduct" and traditional belief that "boys will be boys," they lack empathy and a moral backbone, and choose to conveniently look the other way.

"Liberal" confusion and sexual peer pressure among young men is, of course, not uniquely Israeli.⁸ In the Israeli context, the young men face mandatory military service and likely combat experience. The teenagers' sense of necessity to "conquer" young women is inseparable from the sense implanted in them that the enemy, the other, must be combated and defeated. For the film's young men, raised in a militaristic society, maturation into masculinity involves violence, force, struggle and triumph. It requires doing whatever it takes to get what must be gotten, the end justifying all means. Such initiation into adult manhood renders sexuality as yet another battlefield, and women yet another "other" that must be conquered.

Since 1992, Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty declares that dignity is the fundamental value underlying Israeli society, law, and human rights. But the society's militaristic orientation, and the indoctrination of men into competitive machoistic manhood, undercut the attempt to foster a dignity-based Israeli society. From a gender oriented perspective, women, particularly in a situation such as Gilli's, pay a dear price for the social training of men to repress emotions and empathy to the other in the process of becoming militant, "real men."

In 1998, Israel passed a sexual harassment law, defining sexual harassment as an offense to human dignity, as well as a restriction of liberty, infringement of privacy and gender discrimination.⁹ The law lists six prohibited behaviors, defining them as criminal offenses, as well as civil torts and employment transgressions that all employers must prevent in their workplaces. The law has brought about a significant change in social norms. Nevertheless, the militaristic nature of Israeli society

⁸ Van de Bongardt et al. 2014.

⁹ Tzili 2001; Kamir 2003.

undercuts this progress, breeding and perpetuating men's objectification of women into "others" that must be sexually subjugated.¹⁰

Military training for workplace gender discrimination: *Zero Motivation*

This very point is similarly taken up by Talya Lavie's debut movie, *Zero Motivation*, which has enjoyed tremendous popularity, quickly achieving the status of a cult film. When Zohar (Dana Ivgy), the film's protagonist, decides that she must dispense with her virginity, she flirts with a combat soldier passing through her air force camp. He seems shy, a little awkward, but willing. After a long, nerve-wrecking day, they are finally alone together in an empty backyard. Here, the combatant literally attacks Zohar, tearing her clothes off and pushing himself into her. When, taken aback, she asks him to be a little gentler, he replies that if it is gentleness she seeks, she should not have taken up a warrior.

Zero Motivation is a quick paced, over-the-top screw-ball military comedy, in the tradition of *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1923, Jaroslav Hašek) and *Catch 22* (1961, Joseph Heller). The near-rape scene transforms into a self-reflective homage to *Thelma and Louise* (1991, Callie Khouri and Ridley Scott), when Zohar's roommate arrives on the scene just in time to prevent the rape. At gunpoint she forces the male soldier to continue with his sexual conquest, but replace Zohar with a trashcan, noting that it is an object more suitable for his action.

Zero Motivation portrays the military experience of young Israeli women stationed in a remote air force camp. They are compelled to perform brainless, menial tasks that fail to challenge or engage them. A thick glass ceiling separates them from the camp's high ranking male officers. Some of the young women, particularly the laughable female officer, buy into the system, repeating empty institutional slogans of patriotic heroism. Others pass the time singing mindlessly and growing numb and dull. One is determined to be transferred to Tel Aviv, and engages in obsessive plotting and manipulation. Zohar, a bright, witty young woman whose job is to open envelopes and empty paper baskets, struggles to maintain her sanity and individuality. She seeks friendship, explores her femininity and experiments with sexuality – all framed by endless meaningless military rules and regulations. Zohar experiences female bonding, betrayal, loneliness and revenge; she flirts and is sexually attacked. Her army service is portrayed as an Israeli version of initiation into maturity.

¹⁰ Izraeli 1997; Ben-Ari and Levy-Schreiber 2000; Ben-Ari 2001; Klein 2002; Sasson-Levy 2006.

The trials of Zohar and her friends are very likely not much different from those of women soldiers in armies of other liberal societies.¹¹ But since in Israel women's military service is mandatory, Zohar – along with many of her peers – feels trapped in a total institution that she would never have chosen to belong to. The confinement to brainless jobs under a thick glass ceiling, the strict, arbitrary rules and regulations that invade privacy, obstruct individual growth and restrict the exploration of femininity and sexuality – these are identified by the films' Israeli female viewers as rites of passage into Israeli adulthood that they too were forced to endure. These rites of passage constitute indoctrination into acceptance of male dominance in the workplace, as well as militaristic male-centered mentality in all spheres of life. They encourage Israeli women who wish to intermingle with hegemony, to adopt chauvinistic points of view and distance themselves from other women, femininity or feminism.

Restrictive stereotypes of femininity: *She Is Coming Home*

Maya Dreifuss' *She Is Coming Home* won the Jerusalem International Film Festival Award (July 2013) for first-time screen writers and directors. It depicts the thirty-something screen writer Michal (Yael Sharon), who, ending a long relationship, moves back in with her parents in Herzliya and embarks on an enigmatic, unsettling relationship with Ze'ev (Alon Abutbul), a fiftyish married school principle. With neither a husband nor children, Michal is a lone misfit. She seems to have not a single woman friend. Instead of raising a family and participating in the rat race, she re-examines her parents and their marital relationship, trying out versions of femininity in her own inexplicable dead-end relationship with Ze'ev. Rebelling against her overbearing, embittered, stereotypical "Jewish mother" (Liora Rivlin), Michal vacillates between the roles of "the innocent maiden," playing basketball with Ze'ev's pupils, and "the whore," showing up in his hotel room "dressed to kill." These one-dimensional virgin and whore stereotypes seem to exhaust her sexual imagination, leaving her hurt, frustrated and stuck.

Michal embodies a young, middle-class, Israeli woman who enjoys the freedom granted her by a liberal society to evolve as she pleases and realize her potential. Yet she finds herself trapped in dull feminine stereotypes and conventional gender roles and relations. Struggling to avoid living the stereotype of "dotting, frustrated, martyr mother," performed by her mother, she acts out the stereotypes of the virginal maiden and the voluptuous whore, failing to find her authentic femininity, sexuality and individuality.

¹¹ Herbert 1998; Carreiras 2006.

In the post-collectivist era, some young Israeli women – such as Michal – refuse to evolve dutifully in a manner most useful for the state and nation. They seek to find not merely their own voices, but also their own femininities, destinations and forms of happiness. They reject the model of “good mother,” searching for alternatives. Such young women run into underlying, unacknowledged traditional stereotypes and conventions. Feeling cheated and frustrated, they bang their heads against the stone wall of social norms.

Israel’s discriminatory, religious family law – *Gett: The Trial of Vivian Amsalem*

Written and directed by sister and brother Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz, *Gett* was accepted enthusiastically, receiving three prizes at the Jerusalem International Film Festival (July 2014), two Ophir prizes (September 2014), and the Israeli nomination for the Best Foreign Language Film competition at the 87th Academy Awards.

Gett is shot, from beginning to end, in a rabbinical family courtroom and the corridor leading to it, depicting the battle fought by Vivian Amsalem (the mesmerizing Ronit Elkabetz) to attain a *gett*, i.e., *halakhic*, Jewish divorce. The movie reveals what is axiomatic for Israelis, but non-Israelis may find utterly perplexing: that divorce in Israel is administered by religious courts, based on their clerical interpretation of ancient religious laws. For Jews who seek to divorce in Israel, this means pleading before an ultra-Orthodox rabbinical court, which applies its ultra-conservative interpretation of the ancient *halakhic* Jewish law. In this court, a married Jewish woman may divorce her husband only if he willingly grants her a *gett*. A woman may request that the rabbinical court coerce her husband to grant her a *gett*, but in order to persuade the court to do so she must convince the rabbis of a good cause.

Vivian Amsalem does not love her husband and believes that he hates her and will do anything to hurt her. She claims that they are not suitable, and that she does not wish to share her life with him. But for the rabbis this is not sufficient legal cause to even demand of a man to grant his wife a *gett*, let alone coerce him to do so. “Know your place, woman,” they scold her. A witness for the defense addresses the rabbis, offering his own life as an example: “Do you think my wife and I suit each other? No, we don’t. So I make her suit me.” Despite Vivian’s five years’ persistence, the rabbinical court refrains from offering her any kind of relief.

Whereas sexual abuse has been the topic of several powerful 21st-century Israeli movies,¹² *Gett* may be the first Israeli mainstream feature movie to focus on the acute topic of rabbinical family courts and their administration of divorce.¹³

¹² Among them *Or (My Treasure)* directed by Keren Yedaya (Bizibi, Transfax Film Productions, Canal+, 2004); *Campfire*, directed by Joseph Cedar (Cinema Post Production Ltd., 2004); *Out of*

Although evident to most – perhaps all – Israelis, this topic is taken for granted to the degree of being invisible.

The legal reality on this point is clear and noncontroversial. Israel has never enacted civil law regarding marriage and divorce, leaving these institutions exclusively in the hands of religious courts that administrate them based solely on religious laws. For Jews, these laws are mostly ancient *halakhic* laws, as interpreted by the conservative ultra-Orthodox rabbis who sit as judges in the rabbinical courts. Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, expert on the topic of family law in rabbinical courts, has described the law on this point – as on many others – in her book *Women in Israel: A State of Their Own*. She begins by clarifying that “Jewish law, perhaps more than any other religious legal system, is pluralistic. It is therefore misleading to present Jewish law as a monolithic normative system or claim a certain representation of Jewish law on a particular issue as an ultimate portrayal of the Jewish law on that issue.”¹⁴ What is enforced in Israel, through rabbinical courts, as Jewish law, is merely one extremely conservative interpretation of it. Under this law, “marriage is in fact a unilateral act on the part of the man who betroths the woman, in a legal transaction that corresponds to acquisition. The status of men and women during the marriage is far from equal. As a traditional patriarchal system, Jewish law strongly adheres to strict gender roles in the family.” One great difference applies to men’s and women’s sexual conduct:

“While a married man’s sexual relationship with a woman other than his wife hardly carries any legal consequence, except for the very rare possibility of considering this to be a ground for divorce, a married woman’s sexual relations with a man other than her husband carry extremely harsh consequences: she is to be immediately divorced while losing her monetary rights otherwise acquired according to the Jewish law. She is prohibited from later marrying either her former husband or the man with whom she had ‘committed adultery,’ and any child that results from the adulterous relationships is considered a ‘bastard’ (*mamzer*) who is precluded from marrying within the Jewish community, except for a convert or a *mamzer* like him/herself. These grave and unequal consequences of women’s extramarital relations profoundly implicate women’s position within the divorce process, which is the main form of discrimination against women under Jewish law.”¹⁵

Halperin-Kaddari emphasizes that “[w]hat distinguishes Jewish marriage and divorce rules from other legal and religious systems is that both marriage and divorce

Sight, directed by Daniel Sirkin (JCS Productions, the Israeli Film Fund, 2006); *Invisible*, directed by Michal Aviad (TAG/TRAUM Filmproduktion, 2011).

¹³ In 2004, Anat Zurya’s *Sentenced to Marriage* was perhaps the first Israeli feminist documentary to depict the harsh reality of women’s discrimination in rabbinical courts. The movie follows women’s desperate attempts to receive a gett, and much of it is shot in the corridors of rabbinical courts.

¹⁴ Halperin-Kaddari 2004, 235.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

are autonomous, voluntary acts of two individuals, not legal actions constructed by the external judicial or religious organ.”¹⁶ What this means is that marriage and divorce can only be performed by the parties themselves, of their free will, and more specifically: by the man, of his free will, since the woman’s will may be substituted (for a legal presumption or a rabbinical decision). The rabbinical courts’ function is thus not “constitutive,” but merely “declaratory”: they declare that the man has freely and mindfully “purchased” a woman for a wife, or that he freely and mindfully divorced her, i.e., relinquished his rights over her and set her free. “Where there is no consent, no divorce can be processed, since contemporary rabbinical courts perceive themselves incompetent to annul marriages, although Jewish law does provide for this mechanism under certain circumstances.”¹⁷

One would think that if a woman fails to obtain a *gett*, she could separate from her husband *de facto*, and start a new family. But *halakhically*, and therefore legally in Israel, in such a case she remains married, i.e., she continues to belong to her husband, and her new relationship is considered adulterous. This implies loss of all her monetary rights, and imposition of the *mamzer* status on her children, which means that they are barred from marrying in Israel. Thus, an Israeli Jewish woman who wishes to maintain her monetary rights and be free to remarry must attain a *gett*. She must convince the rabbinical court to use its power to influence the husband to release her.

“Rabbinical courts may use several terms of ordering divorce, from the very lenient recommendation to divorce, to the harshest term permitting coercion under very rare circumstances. Each term permits varying degree of sanctions against the recalcitrant party, and the highest category of coercion permits the incarceration of the recalcitrant husband. However, divorce claims against women are easily accepted by rabbinical courts, and women are ordered to accept the *gett*. Similar claims against men, under similar circumstances, rarely produce an order to grant the *gett*. Contemporary rabbinical courts tend to refrain from compelling a man to divorce.”¹⁸

Even physical violence is not usually viewed as justifying coercion of a divorce on the man, but merely a recommendation for him to grant a *gett*. Since this is common practice and common knowledge:

“This leads the way for a common course of negotiation, which generally results in the woman buying her way out of the marriage by paying whatever the husband demands in terms of property rights, child support and so on. Women who refuse to pay for their freedom to remarry have no recourse in the Israeli legal system. They are *agunot*, women who are ‘chained’ or ‘anchored’ to their husbands, with no relief available in the religious civil system. [...] Thus, the power imbalance is not remedied by the judicial system.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 237.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 238.

This is also the fate of a childless widow (a woman whose husband died without leaving offspring). She is *halakhically*, and so legally, considered married to the dead husband's brother, and can only be free to remarry if and when the brother agrees to divorce her, in a procedure called *halitza*. "In these circumstances, the widow's freedom to remarry depends on the deceased's brother's cooperation, and there are cases of money being demanded in exchange for *halitza*. [...] According to data supplied by the Administrator of the Rabbinical Courts, there were twenty such cases of women in need of *halitza* on average a year during the 1990s."²⁰ The passing of a new 1995 law, Rabbinical Courts (Enforcement of Divorce Decrees) (Temporary Measures), had a small impact, because "making use of this mechanism is dependent upon the personal conviction of the religious judge as to its *halakhic* legitimacy. Furthermore, on the practical level, still fewer than half the cases where restraining orders are issued actually result in a divorce: 71 of 163."²¹

This is the reality that the 2014 movie *Gett* vividly depicts. As mentioned earlier, despite wide public awareness of this extremely discriminatory socio-legal reality, *Gett* is the first Israeli feature movie to openly address, portray and criticize it.

Four of Israel's 2014 women's movies depict and offer a feminist critique of incestuous abuse, adolescent group intercourse, militaristic chauvinism, confining gender roles and stereotypes and indoctrination into male domination in the workplace and the public sphere. All this is set against the portrayal of Israeli society as a liberal, Western one, and its gender concerns as typical of such societies.²² The movies further attest to the professional proficiency, independence, feminist awareness and power of Israeli women filmmakers. The movie *Gett* exposes the religious-patriarchal, explicitly gender discriminatory and oppressive nature of Israel's marriage and divorce law. The agglomerate of movies reveals an unsettling duality in Israel's construction and treatment of its women, which I now turn to address.

Conceptual framework: the double Zionist standard regarding women

The Israeli Declaration of Independence (1948) constituted gender equality, and the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty (1992) guaranteed full human rights to all Israelis, men and women alike. This seems to have reflected and refracted women's self-perception. In the early days of statehood, as in the preceding decades of Zionist pioneer settlement, Israeli women proudly posed (in very short pants and

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 239.

²² As mentioned above, *Self Made* treats the Jewish-Palestinian divide in Israel, but it too is set against the liberal Jewish-Israeli reality.

sleeves) toiling the land and carrying weapons; they pronounced and celebrated their right to fully and equally participate in agricultural work, as well as military service and society building.²³ In the early 1970s, they took pride in Golda Meir's prime ministry, and in 2007 they did not hesitate to demand – and bring about – the investigation of Israeli president, Moshe Katsav, for rape and sexual harassment, which eventually led to his resignation, prosecution, conviction and incarceration. Accordingly, most Israelis, men and women alike, are quick to state that Israeli women have never needed feminism, since they have always enjoyed full equality, power and high esteem. At the same time, these very same Israelis are fully aware of Israel's marriage and divorce laws, which subjugate women to men and to archaic religious institutions, which discriminate and humiliate them. Most women, like men, seem to accept this reality as indisputable fate.²⁴ It seems that in Israel, women are conceived as equal citizens and powerful individuals – and at the same time “naturally” discriminated by patriarchal, religious family law. Where does this double standard come from, and what deep, collective purpose does it serve?

I suggest that the source of this split can be traced to the original goals of political Zionism, the national Jewish movement that envisioned the Jewish state of Israel and shaped it accordingly.²⁵ Political Zionism was established by central European Jews at the end of the 19th century, the era of nationalism, in response to European national movements' blunt rejection of Jews. This rejection was allegedly based on Jewish men's insufficient manliness. Jews such as Theodor Herzl, the founder of the political Zionist movement, were integrated through education, economic activity and legal rights in their European societies, but were commonly not viewed as manly enough to be considered full members of the nations in which they lived.²⁶ Herzl himself attended a German-speaking university, studied law, was a journalist and a playwright, but had to struggle for membership in a Germanesque fraternity, since the initiation involved dueling, a ritual that Jews were not considered manly enough to partake in.²⁷ Political Zionists were determined to prove to the world – and to themselves – that they could be as manly and nationalistic as any other group of European men. Their vision was not merely to establish a Jewish state, but to establish a new Jewish manhood, adequately masculine and nationalistic. More specifically, in line with European notions, the new Jew would be assertive, bold, self-restrained, commanding and honorable in his dealings with other men, his

²³ Shilo 1998.

²⁴ The demand for reform in marriage and divorce law was always present, even in pre-state days, but never achieved mainstream status. For such pre-State feminist action, see Stern Margalit 2009.

²⁵ I have been developing this line of argument in a long list of publications in Hebrew: Kamir 2004, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2014.

²⁶ Mosse 1985 and 1996, 96–98; Gilman 1986, 1991, 1993; Biale 1986; Berkowitz 1993; Kornberg 1993; Boyarin 1997.

²⁷ Kornberg 1993, 41–42.

peers; he would be the powerful patriarch of the Jewish family and vis-à-vis his Jewish wife; he would be a member of a manly, autonomous, self-determining national collective – a Zionist. In the eyes of the founding fathers of political Zionism, Jewish men of their day (many of whom were yeshiva students) were effeminate in comparison with other European men, dominated by their powerful (“manly”) wives and hence members of a dishonorable, despised collective. Reconstructing the Jewish man was a monumental task that required the movement’s full attention.

Political Zionism, much like other European national movements of that era, was almost completely oblivious to women and femininity.²⁸ The political Zionist movement was only interested in women inasmuch as they could either hinder or enable and support the creation of new, honorable, powerful Jewish men. No energy was dedicated to the envisioning of a new Jewish woman: she was to be the mirror in which the new Jewish man would see himself as – and become – a masculine, nationalistic man. Accordingly, the Zionist woman was expected to fulfill several roles, all reflecting and facilitating the needs of the new Jewish man.

In a binary response to the Jewish collective’s traditional European depiction as a single-gender, “feminine,” “effeminate” group, Zionism aspired to transform Jews into a single-gender super-manly group. In the eyes of the world, therefore, Zionist women were required to be as manly and honorable as the men. In the internal public sphere, in which Jewish men were to interact with each other honorably, women were expected to adhere to the masculine honorable standards, yet not to compete with the “real men” or challenge their superiority. They were, rather, to behave as “secondary,” “diminished” men, leaving the front stage and lead roles to the true Jewish men. In the private realm of the Jewish family, the Zionist woman was to stand by her new Jewish man and allow him to rule as a powerful patriarch.

I believe that these expectations, laid down in Zionist novels, plays, public lectures and countless letters and diaries, were fully understood by Zionist women, and on the whole – internalized by them. I argue that this unwritten pact between Zionist men and women underlies gender construction of Israeli (Zionist, mainstream) society to this day. Israeli women have by and large accepted the requests of Zionism, and constructed their self-perception accordingly. They have learned to be proud members of the manly, national, Zionist collective, “lesser men” in the internal Israeli public sphere and traditional women to their Jewish men in the private family sphere.

When Zionist women posed, at the turn of the 20th century, with weapons and work tools, they did so knowing full well that in fact they were almost unanimously denied participation in combat or agricultural work.²⁹ Posing for the cameras they were dutifully preserving the equality myth, to enhance the collective’s manly hon-

²⁸ Shilo 2007.

²⁹ Swirski 1991; Shilo 2007.

or among the nations. Their photos demonstrated that all Zionists, men and women alike, were equally “manly.” Golda Meir, the single woman prime minister in the history of Israel, held cabinet meetings in her kitchen, always in skirts, and tirelessly stressed her grandmotherly characteristics. She was said to be a “real man,” but even holding the highest political position in the state, found it necessary to reassure the men surrounding her that she did not threaten or overshadow their manhood. In the private family sphere Israeli women mostly accept the halakhic law that subjugates them, as if the Israeli legislature were powerless and incapable of enacting modern, egalitarian laws of marriage and divorce. In so doing, they enable their men to be omnipotent patriarchs, just like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, assuming the traditional role of the nation’s mothers (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah). This social reality is openly reflected in the Law of Women’s Equal Rights (1951), which refrains (section 5) from applying gender equality to marriage and divorce. The same socio-legal reality is reaffirmed in the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty, which upholds (section 10) all existing Israeli law, including the discriminatory laws of marriage and divorce.

Since the 1990s, Israeli society has gradually learned that women in Israel are battered, raped, harassed and murdered by their husbands and fathers as in any other part of the world; that Jewish, Zionist men do sometimes batter, rape and kill their wives and daughters. This could have driven Israeli women to rethink their historical Zionist “contract” with their men. I claim that Israeli men and women managed to avoid such reconsideration of the fundamental construction of gender roles by pathologizing a segment of the private sphere, while absolving the remaining terrain. This is to say that some evil, degenerate men amongst us do indeed rape, batter and kill their wives and daughters, but they are the “other” (the sick, outsiders, “not-really-Jewish”). While the pathological part of the private sphere shames us and must be penalized, separated and distanced from the collective body, this aberration does not reflect on the vast, normative parts of the private sphere, and those should be respected and left to rule themselves.

A second look at 2014 Israeli women’s movies

Having presented you with an outline of a conceptual framework, let us return to the 2014 Israeli women’s movies reviewed in this chapter. I suggest that, read against the conceptual framework, these movies illuminate the diverse roles that Israeli (Zionist, mainstream) women still fulfill according to the historical Zionist gender “pact” – as well as Israeli women’s increasing awareness and growing critique. 2014 women’s movies can be read as a socio-cultural text, exposing, reflecting on, and condemning Israeli women’s schizophrenic reality and demanding a change.

Shira Gefen’s *Self Made* focuses on two women: one Jewish Israeli, the other Palestinian. Here, the Jewish Israeli woman is not a proud member of an honorable,

manly collective, but merely a singular individual woman. Through a technical mistake, she finds herself switching places with another singular individual woman: a Palestinian one. The presentation of both protagonists as singular individual women, who may find themselves in each other's lives, offers gender and human individuality as a common denominator that challenges Israeli women's historical role as members in a manly collective. Rather than be "an honorary (small) man" among Jewish Israeli men, the movie's Jewish Israeli woman is situated in a one-on-one relationship with a Palestinian woman.

Six Acts, *Zero Tolerance* and *She Is Coming Home* all challenge Israeli women's role in the internal Israeli public sphere. In these three films, teenage girls, female soldiers and young professional women attempt to be equal persons and citizens in a society in which this means "lesser men." In *Six Acts*, Gilli engages in casual sexual activity, like "one of the boys" – only to realize that beneath the thin conventional layer of gender equality (sometimes mistaken for liberalism), "boys will be boys" and girls will never be allowed to. Young men are collectively encouraged to become "real men" – combatants who overpower the enemy and conquer women – while young women who "sleep around" are not socially constructed as "honorary (if lesser) men" but as "easy to get/shameless sluts." The protagonists of *Zero Motivation* wear the prestigious air force uniform only to be reduced to performers of mindless secretarial jobs, coffee bearers and sexual objects. Under the guise of the misleading uniform that portrays them as "honorary (if lesser) men," they are, in fact, demanded to perform the menial feminine gender roles of traditional patriarchal societies. Ten years older, we are told by *She Is Coming Home*, as professional career women, they can choose to become domineering, frustrated, bitter, stereotypical "Jewish mothers," enjoying the facade of respectability, or vacillate aimlessly between patriarchal stereotypes of "maiden" and "slut." In all age groups, feminine solidarity is almost non-existent in a world in which women attempt to be "honorary (lesser) men" among men.

That Lovely Girl and *Gett* focus on the private, family sphere. *That Lovely Girl* depicts the paradigmatic, blood curdling reality of the "pathological part" of this sphere, illuminating not merely its horror, but also its proximity to "normal" family life. *Gett* goes a step further, and tears the veil off the holy of holies, declaring that the normative part of the family sphere is similarly pathological. The discrimination, humiliation, restraint and abuse of the Jewish Israeli woman is no better in the normative part of the private sphere than in what has come to be viewed as the pathological exception. This reality, shot in the corridors of the rabbinical family court, is just as claustrophobically oppressive as the prison of a "demented" incestuous father portrayed in *That Lovely Girl*.

The six Israeli women's movies of 2014 seem to shed light on all three dimensions of Israel's historical "gender pact," harshly exposing and critiquing them. Some Israeli Jewish women, apparently, are questioning women's membership in the manly Zionist collective, which, they suspect, comes at the expense of individu-

al humanity and femininity as well as cross-cultural sisterhood; they are re-evaluating the status of “honorary (lesser) men” in the Israeli public sphere, which, they claim, comes at the expense of sexual abuse and gender discrimination; they are reviewing even the sanctity of the private sphere Israeli Jewish family, which empowers Jewish men while imprisoning women in archaic, pathological socio-legal patriarchal structures. If these movies reflect current sentiments among Israeli Jewish women, if they reach audiences and affect them, perhaps Israeli women will eventually decide to rethink the historical “gender pact,” form feminine solidarity, and bring about change. When they chose to fight “pathological” sexual abuse they discovered that they had significant power. Perhaps they might do so again.

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