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Book review, by Anissa H lie

Righteous Transgressions: Women’s Activism on the Israeli and Palestinian Religious Right. *By Lihi Ben Shitrit*

Righteous Transgressions: Women’s Activism on the Israeli and Palestinian Religious Right. By [Lihi Ben Shitrit](#). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 239pp. \$22.95 paper.

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This book has been debated in Palestine and Israel, the focal region of Lihi Ben Shitrit’s research. Criticism centers on the author’s attempt to analyze two “sides” of the main politico-religious extremes: Jews and Muslims embracing ideologies of the religious right. Such criticism arises, in part, because no one wishes to be compared to the “menacing ‘Other’” (p. 227) and especially, for Palestinians and their allies, to a disproportionately dominant other. But Ben Shitrit points out that these sides have widely different access to power, and her comparative approach is justified given that politico-religious groups of various creeds share key ideological commitments, including a rejection of gender equality (or, as per their lexicon, the promotion of a “gender complementarity model” [p. 130]).

Focusing on the four most influential groups – Jewish settlers in the West Bank, the Ultra-Orthodox Shas, the Islamist movement in Israel, and Hamas militants – Ben Shitrit specifically examines the role played by women who “actively advocate formal political agendas grounded in patriarchal religious interpretations” (p. 6). This emphasis on women’s ultra-conservative activism – and particularly the issue of women’s agency where “tensions [exist] between ideological commitments and actual performance” (p. 33) – is relevant and timely, offering a welcome addition to the existing literature.

Notably, Ben Shitrit did not have equal access to all of her anthropological data: during her two years of fieldwork, she could not interview women from Hamas, relying instead on secondary literature. However, this asymmetry, which she acknowledges, does not diminish the relevance of the questions at the heart of this carefully researched book: “What are the politics and mechanisms of women’s efforts to advance socially conservative religious objectives? ... And what are the consequences of their activism for their movement, for the activists themselves and for women in general?” (pp. 4-5). Is their work “ultimately conservative, as opposed to transformative” (p. 227)?

Aside from the introduction and conclusion, the book has four sections, each articulating a facet of the main inquiry, and each further divided in subsections devoted to one particular movement. Chapter 2 provides historical background for each movement, its gender ideologies and relation to feminism, stressing their similarities and differences. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on women's "complementarian activism" through their domestic, community, and religious engagements, and consider women's more transgressive protests, which he justified through "affectivity and maternal credentials" (p. 128). Chapter 5 addresses women's (dismal) formal representations in the movements' governance structures.

Showing that "women's labor is essential to the very sustenance" of their movements (p. 80), Ben Shitrit describes the strategies through which extremist women carve a space for themselves within the confines of strict patriarchal parameters. She describes women's endorsement of various forms of gendered control, while demonstrating "how women who do subscribe to the nonegalitarian gender doctrines of their religious-political movements, and vehemently reject a discourse of feminist resistance, nevertheless engage in forms of political activism that transgress (rather than adhere to) the roles assigned to them by these same doctrines" (p. 16).

Distinguishing between the four groups' "proselytizing and nationalist commitments" (p. 78), Ben Shitrit demonstrates that women in the two *nationalist*-oriented groups – the settler movement and Hamas – participate in more transgressive forms of activism (e.g., "unruly" public confrontations). Crucial here are the *frames of exception*, whereby the "concern with a nationalist or communalist agenda provides women and movements with discursive tools to create ... motivational frames that justify an exceptional, temporary, and out-of-the-ordinary transgression of gender ideology for the sake of a more urgent cause" (p. 181). In contrast, women's involvement in the *proselyting*-focused Shas and Islamic movement adheres better to their movements' restrictive gender ideologies. Yet Ben Shitrit also finds that "paradoxically, it was the two proselytizing movements that ... offered women powerful liberatory narratives" (p. 228) – but, crucially, she warns that these "should not be confused with a feminist consciousness" (p. 238).

Still, Ben Shitrit could have engaged in more complex theorizing of women's agency. Adopting Saba Mahmood's rejection to equate agency with emancipation, she mostly addresses individual agency. She could have discussed further how women's participation in those movements affects *collective* empowerment for women. Hence, I suggest caution regarding Ben Shitrit's hope that "transgression of complementarian gender roles ... could challenge socially conservative religious-political movements' underlying gender ideology" (p. 225). Extremist women remain supporters of sexist, racist, authoritarian, exclusionary doctrines, and this reviewer is more convinced by Ben Shitrit's observation that "the well-being of the nation [is] the only justification for women's transgressions" (p. 228) and that, therefore, "righteous" transgressions are only "a strategy for exceptional times that would and *should* be relinquished once normalcy is achieved" (p. 130, emphasis original).

Notwithstanding, this is a well-written, insightful, and important contribution to the intersecting fields of gender, religion, and politics. It should be read by all concerned with the study of women and extremism, especially those interested in violent conflict and authoritarian ideology.

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