
Глава 11

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EXPRESSING DISSENT, LEADING THE CHANGE: VISUAL ACTIVISM OF ISRAELI-ETHIOPIAN WOMEN ARTISTS

This chapter aims to expose the pivotal role of young Jewish women artists of Ethiopian origin living in Israel, and their social contributions through artistic production. I argue that young Israeli women of Ethiopian descent (“Ethiopian-Israeli” women) are taking center stage in several domains in Israeli society – in politics, social activism and in the arts. In the last decade, young Ethiopian-Israeli women are taking on leadership positions and expressing the dissent of their generation. I suggest that their gendered position as women is what enables them to become the avant-garde and allows them to express open criticism against the racism and discrimination that the Ethiopian community in Israel is experiencing in contemporary times.

The proceeding discussion integrates artistic analysis with an exploration of the gendered sense of belonging in Israel. It presents a feminist discourse in offering radical criticism of women’s lives and a political perspective on social and cultural situations of the Ethiopian community. The methodology used for this analysis is interdisciplinary, drawing on cultural

studies, migration studies, and visual analysis. Aiming to formulate a multi-layered discussion about the ways in which women cope with issues of identity, homeland, and belonging, I address three major identity categories – gender, race, and religion – to complicate the seemingly stable notions of self and cultural belonging. These categories highlight the complex nexus of overlapping and sometimes contradictory affiliations and identities that characterise migrating women in an age of transnationalism.

Using case studies of six Ethiopian-Israeli female artists – Elsa Tegegne, Eden Desta, Eden Yilma, Rina Ingidau, Nirit Takele and Rachel Anyo – I show how such artists convey their experiences as black women in the country. Their artwork constitutes a rich mosaic of ideas and views as part of a canvas that encompasses the challenges and advantages of Jewish migration in an ethno-national context: feelings of difficulty and joy, failure and success, belonging and alienation. They address the ways in which women form their identities as Jewish migrants in the state of Israel, as each artist selects and underscores a particular aspect out of the several dimensions they hold simultaneously.

Some stress the gender issues that accompany migration; others address the question of how Ethiopian migrants assimilate, physically and emotionally, into a primarily white society. Each work of art deals with these aspects in different shapes and forms, representing an individual subjective and critical voice. Collectively, the cadre of works employs visual activism, which is a tool and means to alter the understanding of the various power relations within society and between different social groups and contribute to actual social change. In the context of feminist art, visual activism involves particular visual attention to the lives of women of various backgrounds, especially minorities and marginalised groups. As Katy Deepwell explains, visual activism aims to transform the

understanding of how political issues are experienced, felt and understood. Such a strategy aims to bring together unexpected elements and new configurations, in order to encourage people to see the world and how it operates¹.

The Ethiopian Community in Israel

The modern state of Israel, established in 1948, was declared as the land of the Jewish people and marked by ethnic nationalism insofar as citizenship is granted only to immigrants who are members of the dominant religion, Judaism. As an integral part of the Zionist ethos, the Jewish component forms a key element in Israel's identity, while creating bureaucratic, theological, and political complications regarding the identity definition of many of the country's residents. This complex situation greatly affects Ethiopian immigrants, many of whom cannot prove their Judaism to the satisfaction of the Orthodox Rabbinical authorities that maintain absolute power over matters of personal status among Israeli Jews, and therefore face significant obstacles to satisfactory assimilation and wellbeing.

Ethiopia's ties to Judaism and the Jewish people are extensive and historical. Ethiopian Christians believe themselves to be the offspring of the ancient Israelites². The Ethiopian Beta Israel community regards itself as the descendants of the Jews who refused to convert to Christianity throughout the generations and preserved their original Jewish faith³. Whereas the Jewish identity of Beta Israel was never questioned in Ethiopia, the Jewish religious establishment in Israel was hesitant to grant the community recognition.

¹ Deepwell K. (ed.) *Feminist Art Activism and Artivism*. // Amsterdam: Valiz Press. 2020; Bryan-Wilson J., Gonzalez J. and Wilsdon D. Editors' introduction: Themed Issue on Visual Activism // *Visual Culture*. 2016. Vol. 15. № 1. P. 5–23.

² Turel S. (ed.) *Ethiopia – The Land of Wonders*. Tel Aviv: Eretz Israel Museum, 2013. P. 20 [Hebrew].

³ Shalom S. *Beta Israel: Origins and religious features*. / *Ethiopia – The Land of Wonders*. (ed) S. Turel. // Tel Aviv: Eretz Israel Museum, 2013. P. 54.

In 1973, however, the former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef declared them to be the descendants of the lost tribe of Dan – a ruling that opened the gates to their migration to Israel as diasporic Jews.

Following this dramatic classification, Jews from Ethiopia began immigrating to Israel since the mid-1970, as they were becoming gradually aware of the option of moving there. The Israeli government has taken on an active role in transporting emigrants and organising airlifts following a government decision to assist the immigration of Ethiopian Jews.

Between 1954 and 1984, thousands of Ethiopian migrants arrived in Israel⁴. The two major waves, however, were Operation Moses and Operation Solomon⁵. Through Operation Moses (November 18, 1984, to January 5, 1985), 8,000 Jewish migrants, mostly from the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia, arrived in Israel after trekking to the border with Sudan under harsh conditions; about 4,000 members of the community did not survive the trek⁶. The larger and better-known immigration wave was Operation Solomon, which began on May 24, 1991, and lasted 34 hours. During that time the Israeli Air Force and El Al planes transported 14,300 people to Israel⁷.

Still today the Ethiopian community is extremely small compared to other immigrant populations in Israel, comprising less than two percent of the country's Jewish citizens⁸. African

⁴ Adeg A. *Journey to the Dream*. Self-published, 2000 [Hebrew].

⁵ Several American Jewish organizations, including the NACOE (North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry), the AAEJ (American Association for Ethiopian Jews), and the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee), assisted in raising awareness among the American and Israeli governments about the need to help Ethiopian Jewry realize their decision to emigrate. See: Kraft, D. *Immigration on the basis of faith* // Haaretz, 16.08.2013. P. 8 [Hebrew].

⁶ Bekya et Al. *Story of a Journey – Emigration from Ethiopia via Sudan*. Haifa: Pardes Press, 2013 [Hebrew].

⁷ Turel S. (ed.) *Ethiopia – The Land of Wonders*. Tel Aviv: Eretz Israel Museum, 2013 [Hebrew].

⁸ Israel's total populace stands at nine million people, 75% of whom are Jewish (Central

Jews are considered a rare phenomenon, as throughout (Western) history Jews were thought to originate from Europe or Arab countries only.

Indeed, given their dark skin's high visibility within Israel's otherwise white society, Ethiopian Israelis are subjected to constant derogatory stereotypes. The Israeli press portray Ethiopian immigrants as socially 'problematic'⁹; health workers single them out as carrying specific health risks for the broader community; and in the educational sphere Ethiopian students are tagged as 'high risk' for academic failure and in need of special support¹⁰. As noted, Israel's Orthodox Rabbinical authorities still refuse to recognise their Judaism and require that they convert to Judaism upon immigration, while also imposing on them systematic marriage restrictions.

Women's Narrative of Emigration from Ethiopia and the Journey to Zion

Dealing with the act of migration from Ethiopia through artistic expression enables immigrant artists to contemplate their sense of belonging to the state of Israel and articulate their relationships with Israeli society. Various Ethiopian-Israeli women artists have chosen to focus on this issue through the prism of Zionist discourse and praxis, including Elsa Tagegne. Tagegne created a video piece depicting the Ethiopian Jews' heroic journey through Sudan, on their way to Israel. The 18-minute video describes a woman walking in a desert, in the midst of an open, vast, extremely dry landscape (Figure 1).

Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

⁹ Wertzberger R. The Ethiopian Community: A Situation Report, Gaps and Claims of Discriminations. // Jerusalem: Knesset Background Paper. 2003 [Hebrew].

¹⁰ Tuval S. Social Representations of Inclusion and Exclusion in the school System that Direct Children to Special Education: Dissertation from University of the Negev, Be'er Sheva, 2004 [Hebrew].



Figure 1.
Elsa Tegegne. "Midbar", 2020
Still photo from video

The video, actually filmed in 2020 in Israel, refers to the historic trek through Sudan, suggesting the lingering post-trauma of Ethiopian Jewry from their quest to arrive in Zion¹¹. And yet, Tegene does not only dwell on the past but also uses contemporary political, civic terms in describing her own artwork, insisting on reminding the Israeli hegemonic society that

Our narrative of the Ethiopian Jews has been almost erased in the Israeli context. Especially the stories of women. It is seldom discussed in mainstream discourse or in the school textbooks and such. My video seeks to embed the Ethiopian narrative into the Israeli general story of the Jewish people and its long journey to arrive in Zion, and in particular women's part and their heroic acts during the difficult journey (personal communication, 3 March 2020).

The artist's aim is to insert the historic journey through Sudan, and along with it the narrative of Ethiopian Jewish women, into the canonical narrative of Zionism. Filming herself in the desert is her way of making a clear, proactive suggestion to restore

¹¹ Engdau-Vanda S. Resilience in Immigration – The Story of Ethiopian Jews in Israel from a Perspective of 30 Years. Tel Aviv: Resling Press, 2019 [Hebrew].

her own place in Zionist national history. Tegegne's work can be conceived of in relation to Chela Sandoval's theory explored in her book *Methodology of the Oppressed*¹². In this text, Sandoval theorizes effective means of survival and agency for marginalized groups. She has identified a "language" – the rhetoric of resistance to cultural conditions – born of the strains of the cultural and identity struggles that mark global change. Sandoval considers this linguistic methodology to contain the possibility of a new historical moment, a new citizen-subject, and a new form of alliance-consciousness and politics. Tegegne's political reference articulates such a strategy for coping with the historicity of experience, counteracting the canonical Israeli history of the State. Nonetheless, Tegegne not only points to a struggle over participation in the national narrative, but also insists on focusing attention on gendered aspects. In several parts of the video she stresses the prominent role that the women played in the long journey through Sudan on their way to Israel through images such as the expressive frames of the female shadow falling on the desert's ground (Figure 2).



Figure 2.
Elsa Tegegne, "Midbar", 2020
Still photo from video

¹² Sandoval C. *Methodology of the Oppressed, Theory out of Bounds.* // University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2000.

Through her video, Tegene offers a subversive meaning to the call to act against marginalization and erasure, in ways that do not necessarily align with the normative call for civic conduct under the unifying nation state and the Zionist ideology of the Jewish ethno-national state. This ideology not only symbolically erases groups such as the Ethiopian Jews from the national narrative on the basis of ethnicity, but also marginalizes them on the basis of gender¹³. Nonetheless, Tegegne's video presents the option of maintaining a simultaneous sense of belonging and pride alongside the urge to unveil the exclusion from which Ethiopian women are suffering.

Blackness, Visibility, and Women's Place in the Public Sphere

The Ethiopian-Israeli community now encompasses 151,800 individuals (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019) – a small community compared to about nine million non-black inhabitants of the country. They nonetheless attain high visibility in Israeli society, which views them with a high degree of ambivalence.

Some contemporary studies in social science indicate that typically Israelis of Ethiopian origin avoid mentioning their blackness in an attempt to gain acceptance within broader Israeli society¹⁴. Nonetheless, most people in Israel point to black skin color to identify Ethiopian Jews, leading to their characterization as Others¹⁵. Indeed, skin color is one of the dominant ways by which the Ethiopian community has been defined – both by veteran Israelis and by the migrants

¹³ Safran H. Don't Wanna Be Nice Girls. Haifa: Pardes Press, 2006 [Hebrew]

¹⁴ Mizrahi N. and Herzog H. Participatory destigmatization strategies among Palestinian Citizens, Ethiopian Jews, and Mizrahi Jews in Israel // *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 2012. Vol. 35. № 3. P. 418–435.

¹⁵ Antebi-Yemini L. On the margins of visibility. In: *Visibility in Immigration – Body, Gaze, Representation*. Eds. E. Lumsky-Feder and T. Rapoport. Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute. 2010. P. 43–68 [Hebrew]; Shabtay M. Living with a threatened identity: The experience of life with a different color among Ethiopian youth and adolescents in Israel // *Megamot*. 2001. Vol. 41. № 1–2. P. 97–112 [Hebrew].

themselves. The extreme emphasis on black skin color by veteran Israelis comprises a gross display of biological racism¹⁶, based on biological physical features. This form of racism assumes a link between attributes such as skin color or body and facial structure, and mental qualities, such as intelligence, motivation, and ethics.

Today, “blackness” serves not only as a physical description of skin color but also as a definition of a conscious political and cultural state. Africanism joins blackness as a geographic, historical, and cultural referent, jointly forming a vigorous and fruitful critical discourse worldwide. In the context of the lives of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, blackness is treated in a dual fashion; it signifies the reason for their exclusion and the discrimination from which they suffer, while also indicating their uniqueness and their rich and ancient tradition, as well as a great source of pride. Some Ethiopian Jews use the term “black” to express political anger; others use the term as a mark of respect for their African roots and traditions; they do so, however, in a way that weaves the context into their present environment and lives.

This complex attitude and relation to blackness is especially reflected in works by women artists of the Ethiopian-Israeli community¹⁷. Rina Ingidau gives a prominent place to the various aspects of female blackness enfolded in the lives of women of her community, challenging the hegemonic Israeli view and overt expressions of racism and sexism. She does that by means of gaining visibility in art exhibitions offered in the public sphere.

In 2019 she created a digital illustrated image of a black woman standing on a small pile of broken pieces of cement,

¹⁶ Shenhav Y. and Yonah Y. (eds). *Racism in Israel*. Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2008 [Hebrew].

¹⁷ Artists such as Esti Almo-Wexler, Gudai Bitaulin-Erez, and Zaudito Yosef-Seri. See: Dekel T. *Welcome home? Israeli-Ethiopian women artists and questions of citizenship and belonging // Third Text – Critical Perspectives on Contemporary art & Culture*. 2015. Vol. 20. Issue 4–5. P. 310–325.

a big sword placed in its center. The scene is embedded in a black and white photograph of a rundown, peripheral neighborhood, typical of an Ethiopian “ghetto.” The young woman is wearing a special outfit, reminiscent of a super hero costume or a knight in armor (Figure 3).

Indeed, the sword in the cement reminds of the mediaeval mythical Arthurian legends. King Arthur’s sword, called Excalibur, is fabled to enable special powers for its owner. Originally associated with the rightful sovereignty of

Britain, Ingidau uses this symbol as if to reclaim power and sovereignty to the Ethiopian community, and above all to the women of that community. The work counters the prevalent white Israeli narrative regarding the Ethiopian community, especially that of black women, as primitive, incapable, and disadvantaged. Ingidau thus confronts derogative stereotypes, creating a representation of a strong, active, and relevant woman. Ingidau’s image is especially related to black women, since the stereotypical patriarchal-chauvinistic stance regards black women as reproductive creatures but not as ambitious beings with developed agency (in contrast to the active, logical, rational white male).



Figure 3.
Rina Ingidau, “Discovery
of Resilience”, 2019
Mixed media

Like the ideas propounded by African American feminist theoreticians and activists such as Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins, Ingidau removes the divide adduced between racism and sexism and highlights the double oppression to which black women are exposed. In contrast to feminists who refrain from linking racism and sexism in favor of universalist femininity, feminists of color expose the diverse structures of oppression that intersect in the lives of black women living in a white patriarchal society. Ingidau clearly demarks this correlation, revealing the pain inflicted on countless women facing the rigid standards of beauty and the impossibility of achieving it under the conditions stipulated by Western aesthetics, in which whiteness constitutes the default of beauty and righteousness.

Hierarchies of Gender and Cultural Production

In many places worldwide oppressive gender notions and negative representations of women reinforce negative racial representations of black people. The prevalence of gender and race as societal constructs applies in Israel as well, flowing over into diverse cultural fields including the arts. Throughout history, creative women have been pushed into the domestic realm¹⁸ and thus excluded from the cultural creativity in the public sphere¹⁹. From the perspective of patriarchy, the artistic activity that women perform falls primarily into the category of traditional craft, which is of merely decorative use. Embroidery, sewing, pottery, and weaving belong to the prominent traditional enterprises ascribed to this field. Several Ethiopian-Israeli women artists have expressed a critical attitude toward this artificial dichotomy²⁰.

¹⁸ Beauvoir de S. *The Second Sex*. // New York: Vintage Press. 2010 (1949).

¹⁹ Nochlin L. *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988 (1971).

²⁰ Many Ethiopian migrant women, especially those who arrived in Israel as adults, create artworks in forms that are regarded as traditional. Such works, for example, were shown

In 2018, artist Eden Desta produced an image, part of a series of photographs of the artist's mother, in which the protagonist engages in basket weaving, sewing, and embroidery throughout her lifetime. The image of the woman is captured in a close-up frame that focuses on a piece of a traditional white cloth and on the letters in the Amharic language written with white paint on her arm. The woman holds in her hand a piece of a rich and complex embroidered cloth (Figure 4).

Desta seeks to combine two gendered aspects in her art – the strength, importance and centrality of the mother-daughter relationship, as well as the richness, depth and importance of crafts that undergo social degradation, considered ‘feminine work’ that is domestic, unimportant, and inferior. The mother-daughter bond is a unique, delicately woven relationship



Figure 4.
Eden Desta, *untitled*, 2018
Color photograph

carefully constructed from fine, yet strong, threads. Like finely embroidered pieces, the task of motherhood is painstaking and arduous, demanding energy, attention, and time. Through her art, Desta protests against the devaluing of women's work in patriarchal society. But rather than using the traditional form of embroidery herself, the young artist's image represents a critical

in the “Gedgeda” exhibition held at the Sadna Art Gallery (Rishon Lezion) in 2008 and are included in the items sold at the fair-trade shop run by the Achoti movement in Tel Aviv. This kind of art possesses complex formal, thematic, and political aspects that deserve a separate study. For more see: Dekel T. *Transnational Identities – Women, Art and Migration in Contemporary Israel*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016.

and reflective act that is constructed and conveyed through the modern medium of photography.

In her more recent works, Desta focuses on themes related to gender in general and to motherhood in particular, often depicting images of her mother performing the Bunna ceremony – the brewing and making of the coffee²¹.

Blood and Race take center stage

Blood comprises a significant cultural symbol throughout history, as evinced in endless wars and acts of vengeance, blood alliances, and slogans such as “blood is thicker than water.” In the context of race, blood becomes even more of a charged concept, as reflected in a painting by Nirit Takele. In her painting from 2018, three black figures are kneeling on the ground, holding up bowls for collecting the red drops that are raining down from bloody clouds in the sky (Figure 5).



Figure 5.
Nirit Takele, “Our donation blood”, 2018
Acrylic on canvas

²¹ The ceremony is typically performed by the woman of the household and is considered an honor. The coffee is brewed by roasting the coffee beans over an open flame in a pan. This is followed by the grinding of the beans. The coffee grounds are then put into a special vessel. The host pours the coffee for all participants by moving the pot over a tray with cups from a height of one foot without stop until each cup is full.

The painting, titled “Our Donation Blood,” relates to both the general sense of inequality between whites and blacks as well as the specific sociopolitical context of deep trauma that Ethiopian Jews experienced in what is known as the ‘blood libel affair.’ Between their arrivals in 1984 and 1996, when the affair was first exposed by the national daily paper *Ma’ariv*, all blood donated by Ethiopian Jews for the national blood bank was systematically destroyed in line with a directive issued by Magen David Adom (the Israeli Red Cross), which was concealed from the Ethiopian donors altogether. Media exposure of the affair aroused an indignant public response and the creation of a public national committee of inquiry. The policy of use or nonuse of blood donated by people living in certain countries – or who had lived in these countries in the past – is, of course, an accepted practice in many blood banks worldwide. Thus, for example, for a long time Israelis who had lived in Britain were not allowed to donate blood for fear of having been infected with foot and mouth disease; other potential donors from African countries were also refused because of the prevalence of HIV/AIDS on the continent²². In the case of Ethiopian Jews, however, the injustice lay primarily in the concealment of the fact that they were not accepted as donors, especially since blood donation constitutes an act of human solidarity bound up with a sense of national identity and a desire to provide services to fellow Jews in need. They sensed the secretive rejection of their blood is an attempt to exclude them from the status of full and equal citizens, or “real” Israelis²³. Given the broader significance of blood with respect to Jewish identity, religion, and culture over the centuries,

²² “Who Can or Cannot Give Blood”, Magen David Adom in Israel, Available at: <https://www.mdais.org/blood-donation/who-can-donate> (accessed: 23.05.2020) [Hebrew].

²³ Seeman D. “One people, one blood”: Public health, political violence, and HIV in an Ethiopian-Israeli setting // Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry. 1999. Vol. 23. P. 159–195.

Jews in Ethiopia regarded blood as a significant symbol that distinguished them from their Christian neighbors through the rules of kosher slaughtering practices, whereby blood must be drained since eating it is forbidden. Hence, when faced with the rejection of their blood by the state of Israel, the sense of religious and national exclusion among members of the Ethiopian-Israeli community was severe²⁴.

Takele's painting represents harsh criticism of this act of exclusion. She metaphorically depicts difficult feelings inherent in the effort to collect the spilled, unwanted blood falling from the sky, but in effect actively describes the lack of acceptance in Israeli society. Notwithstanding, at the same time she emphasizes the strength of women in the Ethiopian community, as they are the ones to gather back the spilled blood and present it to the general public.

Indeed, Takele reveals loaded feelings, undermining the prevalent stereotype held by white Israeli society of Ethiopians as nice, quiet and restrained people²⁵. The work openly expresses the difficult emotions Ethiopian Jews feel toward their absorbing society and at the same time criticizes the gender discrimination and exclusion from which women suffer.

Race, Gender and Religion

In another painting by Takele, from the year 2016, three black female figures are standing, almost naked, in a bathing area. The body posture of the figure in the foreground clearly indicates that she is embarrassed of her exposed body and is trying to cover up her intimate parts (Figure 6).

²⁴ Ben-Eliezer U. Nigger Sambo, Billy Billy Bambo: How a Jew becomes black in the promised land. In: Racism in Israel. (eds). Y. Shenhav and Y. Yona. Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2008. P. 130–157 [Hebrew].

²⁵ Levi-Wineriv E. They are not nice. Globes. 5 May, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001033258> (accessed: 22.05.2020) [Hebrew].

Upon their arrival in Israel, the Ethiopian Jews were ordered to perform a ceremonial act related to Jewish identity. Since they were not considered 'real Jews,' they had to undergo a conversion process involving mass 'Tevila' - immersion in a ceremonial bath ('Mikveh') that is expected of a convert. Adding to the insult, the well-organized and pre-planned operation executed by the Orthodox Rabbinical institution required witnesses to the immersion in the ceremonial bath. However, since women are not considered valid witnesses, only men can supervise and authorize the conversion process. Thus, Ethiopian women were asked to dip in the ritual baths virtually naked, in front of male representatives.



Figure 6.
Nirit Takele, "Mikveh", 2016
Acrylic on canvas

Tekele testified that she has heard countless stories of women who were traumatized when ordered to appear nearly naked in front of males who are strangers to them in order to perform the immersion in water. For thousands of women, trauma from the event lingered for many years to come, leaving them humiliated and depressed.

To this day, in fact, some Orthodox sectors still refuse to acknowledge that Jews from Ethiopia are 'real Jews.' Although

the Orthodox political parties were not able to prevent them from coming to Israel and attaining citizenship, they are able to govern and regulate their personal status in matters such as marriage. Thus, when Ethiopian-Israeli Jews wish to marry, they must confront the rabbinical institution – the sole institution charged with the registration and authorisation of marriages, since civic marriage is not offered in the country. When they come to register, the couple must undergo an investigation of their religious background over at least three generations, as the entire community is singled out by these religious authorities and automatically suspected of not being Jewish. The Ethiopian women then have no choice but to ‘convert’ to Judaism by dipping in the ritual bath, although they are already Jewish. If they refuse, they are declined a marriage license²⁶.

Given this reality, clearly Takele’s artwork is reacting to the oppressive practice of differentiating between different ‘kinds’ of Jews and the Orthodox claims that some Jews are more ‘Kosher’ than others. Seen in this light, her work takes an active stance against the injustice caused to women in her community by the religious patriarchy and its discriminatory rulings.

Women at the Frontline against Police Violence

Images of men of Ethiopian descent seldom appear in the Israeli media. When they do, they are generally discussed in a negative context²⁷. However, since the summer of 2015, when many community members took to the streets of Israeli cities to protest their ongoing oppression and discrimination, particularly

²⁶ Ben David A. and Menegisto A. Exposure: Rabbis refuse to marry a couple of Ethiopian origin. Nana 10. 22.05.2015 [Hebrew].

²⁷ A paradoxical dichotomy is evident in the representation of Ethiopian-Israeli figures. On the one hand, male images appear with positive connotations, such as soldiers serving in the army and working in respectable public jobs; and on the other hand, on a much larger scale, the media demonizes and pathologizes Israeli men of Ethiopian descent by focusing on disorderly conduct among young men or violence of men toward their female partners.

involving police violence toward young Ethiopian-Israelis, reports on television and in newspapers have covered clashes between citizens of Ethiopian descent and the police²⁸. These clashes and the extensive police violence against such citizens exercising their democratic right to demonstrate proved, once again, that racism is deeply embedded in the heart of the Israeli establishment and society, and that the encounter between black and white citizens is fraught with explosive tension²⁹.

Repeated incidents of police violence against Israelis of Ethiopian origin gave rise to a spectrum of representations in art works by young Ethiopian-Israeli women artists. A series of paintings by Eden Yilma, for example, shows Ethiopian-Israeli men who fell victim to police violence. The painting titled “Where are the boys” from 2019 depicts a mother and father holding a framed photo of their son Solomon Tekah, who was killed by gunshots fired by a policeman, with

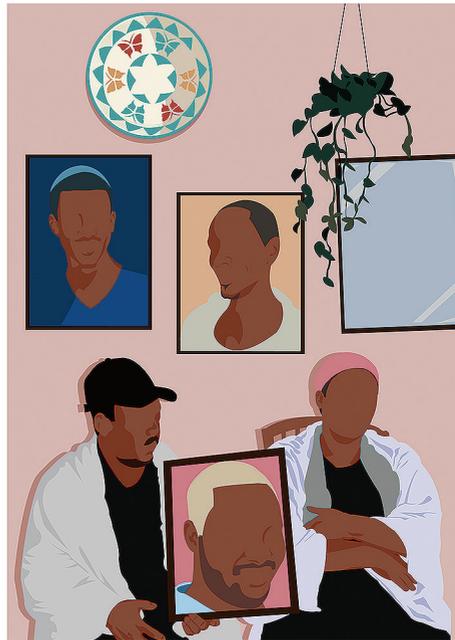


Figure 7.
Eden Yilma, “Where are the boys”,
2019
Digital illustration

²⁸ The demonstrations in the summer of 2015 were preceded by protests in Kiryat Malachi in 2012 spurred by incidents of institutionalized racism manifested in the refusal to sell apartments to Ethiopian-Israelis. See: Shani R. Documentation of discrimination against Ethiopian-Israelis in Kiryat Malachi // WallaNews. 2012. 26 January. Retrieved from: <https://news.walla.co.il/item/2504048> (accessed: 23.05.2020) [Hebrew].

²⁹ Abu O. Yuval F. and Ben-Porat G. Race, racism, and policing: Responses of Ethiopian Jews in Israel to stigmatization by the police // Ethnicities. 2017. Vol. 17. Issue 5. P. 688–706.

additional framed photos of young black men who died after violent encounters with police forces hanging on the wall behind them (Figure 7).

For many young Israelis of Ethiopian decent despair and hopelessness in the face of racism and police brutality undermine their faith in state institutions. Indeed, almost nothing has been done to improve their lot, while the gaps deepen and discrimination abounds, despite frequent government declarations on the matter³⁰. In this context emerges the critical activism of young Ethiopian-Israeli women artists. Emphasizing the women's (especially mothers') central role in gaining the public attention, such as Avera Mangisto's mother³¹, women artists create a growing number of art works on this burning issue. In Yilma's work, the black men in the framed photos convey an impressive stance, alluding to resistance to oppression and the artistic ability to construct meaning without asking for permission or begging for acceptance. Yilma offers criticism of the hegemonic society's oppression, while emphasizing asymmetric power relations between establishment representatives and ordinary citizens, as well as those between different groups in Israeli society, such as whites and blacks.

This brave dissent is particularly evident in another work of art Yilma produced, together with Rachel Aynao. Titled

³⁰ David S. Israeli-Ethiopians: An anatomy of a double crisis. // Haoketz. 2015. 6 June. Retrieved from: <https://www.haokets.org/2015/06/06/%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A6%D7%90%D7%99-%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%94-%D7%90%D7%A0%D7%98%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%94-%D7%A9%D7%9C-%D7%9E%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%A8-%D7%9B%D7%A4%D7%95%D7%9C/> (accessed: 23.05.2020) [Hebrew].

³¹ Avera Mangisto is an Israeli citizen who in 2014 crossed the border into Gaza. Since then, no sign of life was received from him. Avera's family, and especially his mother, became the face of a growing civic movement to motivate the Israeli government and international entities to bring him back home to Israel, see: Shalev T. Mangisto's family leaves for the U.S.A to promote Avera's return // WallaNews. 2017. 8 November. Retrieved from: <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3110180> (accessed: 23.05.2020) [Hebrew].

“Profil(ing) Picture,” the photograph includes faces of young members of her community pressed against a glass surface that distorts their faces (Figure 8).

The two artists refer to the highly problematic police use of racial profiling. African features and black skin are relatively rare in Israel and serve as a key tool by which policemen stop blacks for questioning, demanding that they present documentation. The two young women artists are not afraid to be blunt and straightforward, bravely revealing police brutality against Israeli Ethiopian citizens, based on racist profiling.

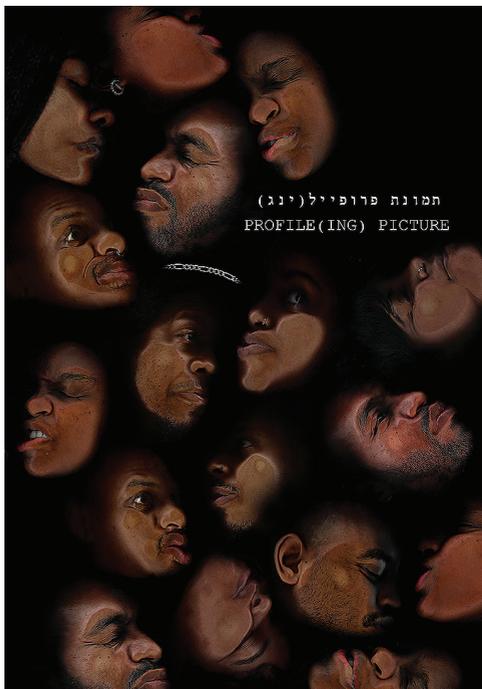


Figure 8.
Rachel Anyo and Eden Yilma,
“Profil(ing) picture”, 2019
Digital collage

Conclusion

In the last decades Jews from Africa have begun reappropriating their denied African identity. In Israel, it is especially the women artists of Ethiopian decent who are actively promoting such affirmation of African identity³². Such attempts at constructing a positive, assertive, and empowering identity formation process are particularly evident in the arts,

³² Dekel T. Transnational Identities. P. 76–80.

but also in other fields, including academia. The framing and definition of the white gaze on black skin now receives expansive expression in the Israeli academic discourse. Despite its small size, the Ethiopian community has been the subject of intense scholarly attention, primarily in the field of anthropology. Yet the studies about Ethiopian immigrants and their descendants that received the greatest budgets and attained the highest visibility and academic esteem were mainly conducted by white scholars³³. The hegemonic discourse consistently assumes the normative experience in Israel as the de facto universal, neutral, modern point of reference. This yardstick is applied to Ethiopian-Israelis, using indexes said to be “objective” such as housing, employment, education, military service, and health³⁴. Some such studies a priori frame Israeli Ethiopian-Israelis as an inferior community. By doing so they reveal their own lack of self-critical awareness; the authors do not acknowledge themselves as not belonging to the researched group; they fail to position themselves in the context of the unequal and often discriminatory power relations. Although these studies claim to apply ostensibly universal indices, they are biased and therefore problematic. The extensive scholarly literature regarding the Ethiopian population in Israel thus frequently constitutes an anomaly and distortion³⁵.

³³ I note that I myself am not of Ethiopian decent but an Ashkenazi woman. I believe it is important to acknowledge the ethical tension this fact creates within this article. The issue is too complex to resolve entirely, but I do not consider myself an expert of Ethiopian Jews, but rather position this article within the larger context of my ongoing research about various groups of women immigrants in Israel, such as immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, South America, and France, see: Dekel T. *Transnational Identities*, 2016; Dekel T. *Hyphenated: Transnational feminism in contemporary Israeli art – Between Mizrahi and Arab identities*. In: *Under the Skin: Feminist Art from the Middle East and North Africa Today*. Eds. C. Opzinar and M. Kelly. Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 2020. P. 41–54.

³⁴ Brookdale Institute. *Integration of Immigrants from Ethiopia in Israeli Society: Policy and Future Programs*. Jerusalem: JDC (Joint Distribution Committee), 2001. [Hebrew]; Shabtay M. *Ethiopian Jews of Beta Israel Origin*. Tel Aviv: Lashon Tzecha Press, 2006 [Hebrew].

³⁵ Vanda H. and Zawdu A. *The political economy of “Ethiopian Jewish Studies” and*

The situation in Israeli academia sharpens the importance of independent moves toward identity formation, with many encouraging signs of this trend becoming visible in recent years. Alongside the plethora of hegemonic studies of Ethiopian immigrants, a parallel significant trend has eluded the focus of white scholars and the white public at large. Many of the '1.5 generation'³⁶ of Ethiopian-Israelis are now coming of age, attaining higher education from academic institutions, and formulating their feelings and stances by and for themselves; and most Ethiopian-Israeli academics are women. Extensive research, books, web sites, and cultural contents are now being written and created from the Ethiopian-Israeli community's own perspective. When Rina Ingidau, Eden Yilma, Eden Desta, Nirit Takele, Rachel Anyo, and Elsa Tegegne create artistic representations of black Israelis, they actively reject the Eurocentric gaze that the local white hegemony imposes on blacks as the Other.

Although highly critical, the artworks produced by Ethiopian-Israelis women seek not only to understand and present their race and gender as oppressive constructs but also as possessing positive and empowering sides. This new outlook identifies blackness and femininity as unique signifiers and the particular gender and ethnic position of black women as their source of recognition and strength³⁷. Much of these understandings are based on international feminist movements, which offer important support to black women artists. The theory and activism of black feminism in the United States gave birth to many artistic works, such as those of the African American artists Faith Ringgold and

the contribution of Ethiopian Jews to Israeli economy and society. Y.E.S. 2010. 3 July. Retrieved from: <https://youngethiopianstudents.com> (accessed 23.05.2020) [Hebrew].

³⁶ '1.5 generation migrants' refer to adolescents immigrating with their parents before or during their early teens, generally 6–14 years old. Hybridity and liminality are salient features of identity and cultural orientation amongst these migrant youth.

³⁷ Dekel T. *Transnational Identities*. 2016. P. 75–79.

Lorna Simpson³⁸, as well as artists based in the African continent, with prominent artists such as Nijdeka Akunyili Crosby and Zanele Muholi³⁹ – all paving the way for a whole generation of young women. The paradigm shift created by these works led to the grounding of the unique voices of contemporary black women across the globe⁴⁰.

In Israel, Mizrahi feminist discourse⁴¹ and Palestinian feminist discourse⁴² are two of the most prominent representatives of this position, drawing their inspiration from the theory, politics, and activism that have developed worldwide since the 1960s⁴³. The artwork of Mizrahi women serves as an assertive voice and model for representing life experiences of non-white women in Israel⁴⁴. Such artworks offer visual expression to gendered identities both as a political stance and as a self-representation of blackness.

In the last decade Ethiopian-Israeli women artists have become highly visible, successful, and overt about the social changes that are urgently needed. Women artists such as Nirit Takele, an award-winning artist⁴⁵, alongside several other women artists of Ethiopian origin that received prestigious prizes⁴⁶ – are paving the way for a whole generation of young black people, sounding

³⁸ Simon J. Lorna Simpson. Munich and New York Prestel Books, 2013.

³⁹ Mussai R. Zanele Muholi: Hail the Dark Lioness. London: Aperture, 2018.

⁴⁰ Fall N. Proving a space of freedom: Women artists in Africa. In: *Global Feminisms – New Directions in Contemporary Art*. Eds. M. Reily and L. Nochlin. London, 2007. P. 71–77.

⁴¹ Lir S. *To My Sister – Mizrahi Feminist Politics*. Bavel Press, 2007 [Hebrew].

⁴² Ghanem H. What is the color of skin? A critical look at color games. In: *Racism in Israel*. Eds. Y. Shenhav and Y. Yona. Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2008 [Hebrew].

⁴³ Rogoff I. *Terra Infirma – Geography's Visual Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

⁴⁴ Alon K. and Keshet S. (Eds.). *Breaking Walls – Mizrahi Feminist Art in Israel*. Tel Aviv: Achoti Press, 2013.

⁴⁵ Takele has won the Sidi Prize (2014); The Sotheby Hammer Prize (2017); A residency scholarship in Ethiopia (2018), and the Israeli Ministry of Culture prize for young artist (2019).

⁴⁶ Among them artists such as Tigist Yosef-Ron and Michal Mamit Vorka.

a clear, loud, and critical voice about racism and sexism that Ethiopian-Israelis are still experiencing in present-day Israel.

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