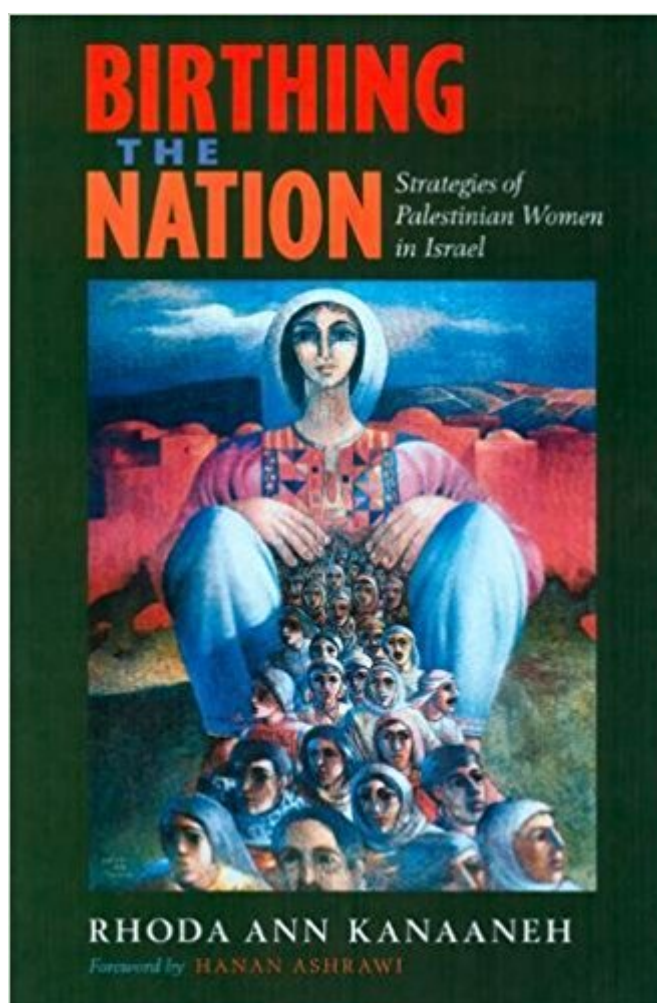


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# Birthing The Nation: Strategies Of Palestinian Women In IsrÄ!l (California Series In Public Anthropology)



## Synopsis

In this rich, evocative study, Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh examines the changing notions of sexuality, family, and reproduction among Palestinians living in Israel. Distinguishing itself amid the media maelstrom that has homogenized Palestinians as "terrorists," this important new work offers a complex, nuanced, and humanized depiction of a group rendered invisible despite its substantial size, now accounting for nearly twenty percent of Israel's population. Groundbreaking and thought-provoking, *Birthing the Nation* contextualizes the politics of reproduction within contemporary issues affecting Palestinians, and places these issues against the backdrop of a dominant Israeli society.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Kanaaneh' sophisticated analysis of politics and demography and how they impact the Palestinians/Israeli conflict in supplemented by another approach that allows Palestinians in Israel to speak for themselves."--The Muslim World Book Review

"Birthing the Nation provides the first serious and comprehensive treatment of an issue full of intense meaning. Kanaaneh sets her unique study against a backdrop of Israeli political arithmetic, Palestinian subordination, nationalism, gender culture, globalization and modernity. Women's bodies and reproductive potential are the sites on which this demographic contest is played out.

Therefore, this book has relevance and resonance far beyond the ethnographic site."#151;Julie Peteet, author of *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement*"This well-written and theoretically informed book remains faithful to the reality of the politics of reproduction in Galilee-indeed to the reality of Galilee society. Throughout, the narrative rings true. Kanaaneh argues compellingly and convincingly that understanding reproductive behavior clarifies how Palestinians within Israel negotiate the tortured path of self-definition and definition."#151;Rashid Khalidi, author of *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of a Modern National Consciousness*"The [Palestinian-Israeli] conflict that shapes this book is sadly alive and indeed booming louder than ever. News broadcasts around the world almost daily report the rising death tolls. We urgently need to hear more feminist perspectives (both male and female) like Rhoda Kanaaneh's that seriously attend to the intersections of politics, 'race,' class, religion and gender. It is indispensable to anyone interested in struggles for justice and freedom, including those against racism and sexism, wherever they may occur."#151;Hanan Ashrawi, spokeswoman for the Arab League and author of *This Side of Peace*"Birthing the Nation shows how, in the case of Israel even more than elsewhere in the world, the demands of states and nations turn private decisions about families and bodies into political arithmetics of populations. Eschewing polemics, Kanaaneh uses detailed ethnography of households, bodies, consumption, sex, and gender in a Palestinian village in Israel to illuminate a crucial new piece of the puzzle of the politics of reproduction: the use of 'reproductive ranking' in negotiations of modernity."#151;Lila Abu-Lughod, editor of *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*"At once a work of political demography, feminist inquiry, and anthropological reflection, *Birthing the Nation* demonstrates with passion and precision how and why the study of reproduction is also the study of social struggle and transformation. It is a 'must read' not only for students of anthropology, women's studies, and Middle Eastern studies, but for anyone interested in the ongoing project of modern nationalism which this study of reproductive politics so brilliantly illuminates."#151;Rayna Rapp, coeditor of *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*

*Birthing the Nation* is a remarkable work of anthropology as well as an important political document. It is one of those books that, by taking a narrow topic and exploring it thoroughly, offers stunning insights on everything from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to the nature of modernity itself. It also is a fun read, filled with hilarious anecdotes and fascinating details. (It is, after all, about sex.)The author is both an American and Israeli citizen who grew up in a Palestinian village in Israel. She speaks fluent Arabic, Hebrew, and English and did her advanced schooling in the U.S. This special

background makes her uniquely qualified to explore such a topic. Because she was raised in a Palestinian village, people from that area were willing to talk to her freely about their private lives. Because she is American-educated and has lived in the United States (and is married to a Jewish American), she knows how to describe Arab culture to Western readers. She knows what we will be interested in, and knows what needs explaining. Kanaaneh devotes a decent amount of time to Israeli government policies regarding reproduction and Israeli political rhetoric on these issues. But the heart of her book is her fieldwork -- hundreds of hours of interviews with Palestinians about having children and having sex, and how the people themselves take stock of such things. The book's main contention is that in Palestinian communities in Israel, reproductive decisions are used as a way of measuring modernity. For example, for many Palestinians, a family's decision to have few children is seen as an indication of how advanced they are. For others, having many children is seen as an indication of how dedicated they are to their national cause. Either way, reproductive decisions are interpreted in a highly politicized manner (by the people involved in them, not by Kanaaneh). The same is true for birth control methods and sex education programs. The book is chock full of surprising details. Kanaaneh presents a picture of a vibrant, changing society that is not quite so "backward" as some of us like to believe. One detail that surprised me particularly was that in Palestinian sex education classes, masturbation is taught as a safe alternative to sex. When a U.S. Surgeon General suggested such a thing during the Clinton administration, the American political establishment went into a delirium (both Democrats and Republicans) and she was quickly stripped of her position! Another thing that is evident is that sensual pleasures -- for both women and men -- have always been an important part of Arab culture, and in some ways the Palestinians are more open about these things than we have been. As a way of "getting into" another culture, this book can't be beat. And given the rapidly changing nature of Palestinian society (and its sadly uncertain future), one feels as though one is reading a historical document in the making. This is a real find.

I can't comment on the details of this book as I read it years ago. I think about the things I learned from it to this day though. If a book has me think about it regularly 7 years after reading it, I have to give it 5 stars.

A good book explaining the 'feminist' approach to Israeli-Arabs living in the Gallilee. This book is not a feminist anthology on Palisitnians on the west bank, rather it is a feminist-nationalist book on the Arab women living in Israel. It looks partly at the ideas of modernization among arab/muslim

women in Israel and tries to look at the varying way that women are used in the nationalist anti-Israel movement. One method is examining birth rates. In order to 'modernize' the Arab women they are encouraged to marry older and have less children. But a second nationalist strain encourages them to have more children in order to 'out breed' the Jewish population. It is an interesting study. A very biased book which frequently replaces the word 'Jew' with the word 'zionist' but it is also the only book of its kind on the issues confronting Arabs in Israel, especially women. Unfortunately there is little focus on the status of women in Arab society, rather the book looks at women as a tool to confronting Israel and how the Arab community uses women in this manner, thus it examines the status of women in Israeli society. But unfortunately although this is supposed to be a feminist text, it comes off as very nationalist, not analyzing problems associated with women in muslim communities, particularly the phenomenon of 'Honor Killings' and other issues, such as the education of women and availability of abortions. An interesting book, a good contribution to literature on Israel, but one must read it with a questioning eye. Seth J. Frantzman

In order to effectively study history, it is necessary to observe and study the progress of change over time. Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh's book *Birthing the Nation* is an anthropological work tracing the evolution of female culture among Palestinians living in Israel. Kanaaneh traces the development of reproduction, sexuality and social characteristics among Palestinian women, and how these conditions have changed over time. She also alludes to political factors, mainly Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, as a major cause of this evolution. The book is extremely enlightening and cogent in its reflection of the condition and lifestyle of Palestinian women; however, it is flawed in that it is inherently biased against the Israeli government. This partiality is manifested through her narrow choice of prejudiced sources and her reference to Israeli-Arabs as "Palestinians-" a label that is not only inaccurate but also deliberately offensive to Israelis. Another unwarranted aspect of the author's work is the use of visibly anti-Israeli sources. A prime example of this is that the book is foreworded by Hanan Ashrawi, a PLO politician that has been linked with terrorist activity in the past. Ashrawi is by no means a neutral source, and evidence of it is her accusation that "[Israelis] rob us of our most basic feelings for our children" (xiii). Taken at face value, this unfounded statement is a testament of her hatred for Israel. Ashrawi has made a long career of attempting to villainize Israel, and this severely hurts her credibility. Further one-sided sources include the likes of Edward Said, long a vehement objector of Israel's existence, and the Palestine Red Crescent Society- an additional condemner of Israel. Even in her attempt to balance her work by including Israeli sources, she chooses to consult radical left-wing politicians, such as Yossi Sarid, whom by no means reflect the

views of average Israelis. Any author wishing to present a somewhat moderate and respectable perspective on such a sensitive issue would consult a wider range of sources. Nevertheless, Kanaaneh's sources range from Anti-Israeli to Pro-Palestinian and this favoritism severely damages her credibility. Another disturbing issue is her recognition of Israel's Arab inhabitants as "Palestinians." In today's context, the term "Palestinians" refers strictly to residents of the West Bank, Gaza, and displaced refugees outside of Israel. The mentioned subjects of the book, Israeli-Arabs residents of the Galilee, are not Palestinians. They are considered (and consider themselves to be) Israeli-Arabs. Even Palestinians do not consider the Israeli-Arabs to be Palestinians, and many even consider them to be traitors for their support of Israel. Israeli-Arabs carry Israeli passports; some serve in the army, and go to Israeli schools. They live in Israel by choice, and are free to leave at any time. Labeling Israeli-Arabs as "Palestinians" is deliberately degrading to Israeli citizens, who consider Galilee Arabs to be of their own. I must note, however, that in this review I refer to the subjects as "Palestinians" so as not to cause unwarranted confusion. The labeling of Arab-Israelis as "Palestinians" is another way in which Kanaaneh's shocking bias is revealed to the audience. *Birthing the Nation* is perhaps one of the most interesting books I have ever read. It summarizes the complex developments of the modernization of Palestinian society, and the everlasting clash between Zionism and pan-Arabism, as each seeks to maximize its influence in one of the smallest countries in the world. The book is by no means impartial, and incorporates several aspects of anti-Israeli propaganda which include (but are by no means limited to) its narrow range of sources and its cataloging of Israeli-Arabs as "Palestinians.". To say that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is merely a collection of historical data is at best a severe oversimplification, at worst a complete lie. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict can only be understood when evaluated in a diverse context that includes the evolutionary progress of both societies (and lack thereof).

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