



In This Issue

Women of Asia
Editorial
Souriya Sourpuss' Soap Opera
Features
Poetry
Memory Lane
Nepali Features

Vol. 1

No. 2

December 1993

Subscribers Only

WOMEN OF ASIA

Between the "Women's Section" and "The Holy Ark"

Yaffa Berlovitz

A Contemporary Portrait of Women's Literature in Israel.

The point of departure for a state-of-affairs' sketch of women's literature in Israel (late 1980s - early 1990s) must be that of overall literary activity, activity which has been marked during this period by three impressive developments (a) a refreshing, surprising and previously unheard of plethora of creativity by veterans as well as younger writers in terms of both subject matter and

poetics; (b) publication and reception of literary works on the part of population groups considered socially marginal: the ethnic sector (Nissim Suissa, Lea Ani), the religious sector (Miriam Easter, Hannah Bat-Shahar), the non-Jewish minority (Emile Habibi, Anton Shammas), and so on; (c) literary life is undergoing a process of popularisation and becoming a media topic. Informative and critical sources (about writers and writing), which a few years ago were esoteric,

are now in popular demand.

Against this background of receptivity, legitimacy, and media acceptance, women's literature is also being published with an unprecedented vitality, particularly a wave of prose, so much so that there is talk of change in the direction of contemporary literature, of a revolution and even of a "feminisation" of Israeli literature. In this essay, we will seek to examine this phenomenon, wherein the leading question is,

why this intensification of women's literature now? After all, conservative Israeli society has not progressed very far in its policies towards women. On the contrary, in spite of the results of activism on behalf of women (within the official institutes as well as within the framework of the feminist movement), and despite the fact that liberal trends from without keep knocking at the door, arousing discussion and argument, the Israeli public has actually been apathetic towards the issue. Accordingly, even if we tried to link this literary expression with the overall social status of women, we would see that the awakening of women's literature during this period is not in answer or response to the Israeli public and its attitude towards women. This is not, I would say, an essentially militant or protest literature, such as we find in women's literature the world over. Rather, it is a literature of presence, which has, at last, come out from behind the scenes, burst on to centre stage and declared: "I'm here!" On the other hand, the contemporary awakening of women's literature, even with its abundant and surprising discoveries, has not undermined the

mainstream leadership of the male author, and the "feminisation" of Israeli literature, as it is referred to, has not yet equitably resolved its argument with the canon of Hebrew literature over the ages. Meaning that, despite its strong presence, women's literature is still deliberating the compromises between it and normative, accepted writing. How does all this find expression?

From the start, and until the last decade, women denied the fact of their sexuality as a guideline in creating their own culture, literature, and language. Unlike women in Europe, and particularly in the United States, who insist on presenting alternative work to that of men, the Israeli woman writer has clung to general Hebrew literature, and adopted accepted poetic paradigms propounded on and dictated by the male writer, which she, like every artist, imposes upon her singular, personal material. Moreover, the female Israeli writer raises her voice in protest when categorised or defined by the label "women's literature." For her this label is a sign of shame, a sort of expulsion from the normative literary camp. As Shulamit Har-Even warned (at an inter-

national women's conference in Jerusalem in 1987): "There is no such thing as women's literature and men's literature, there is good literature and bad literature." Similarly, in an essay responding to the question of the status of women in Israel, she uses the metaphorical language of men describing a housewife as a "good commander," and proper housekeeping and raising a family like "commanding a unit" (Different and Equal, The Dulcinea Syndrome).

On the other hand, the Israeli woman writer feels, despite her involvement in literature, that she will continue to be ranked second best; and that, even if she succeeds in being accepted by the artistic community's mainstream, she will be considered an accessory (Lea Golberg accompanied Shlonski and Alterman, Dalia Ravikovitch-Amichai and Zach, Yona Wallach-Meir Weiseltier and Yair Horwitz).

Despite this, few women writers over the years have contemplated these issues: the subordination of the woman writer in Israeli literature, her efforts to adapt herself to mainstream literature, and the

absence of her unique, female voice. It appears that the Israeli woman writer has not been bothered by, nor perhaps even aware of, this, since it is only during the 1980s that we encounter the treatment of the female writer's conception of self, her status within the literary community, and her image in the public eye. Nurit Zarhi, in her book "Irrelevant Thoughts about the Lady" (1982), uses the biographies of women writers of the Western world to learn how the world has striven to cut them off, regarding them as deviant and injurious to proper cultural order, and attempted to return them to their natural and traditional place in the kitchen and in the home. Here one should add that Zarhi's "Irrelevant Thoughts" finds its fundamental expression in Gilbert and Gubar's "Madwoman in the Attic," which describes the conception of the woman writer in western culture as "castrator." "Creation" is conceived of not only as the intellectual business of the man, but as an essential element of his biological and anthropological nature; meaning, a metaphorical reenactment of his sexuality: an externalisation of his potent talent through the pen and his

conquest of the white, passage page; implying fertilisation.

Certainly, in a culture which from the start invalidates women's work as biologically and existentially fated, and forces her to overturn world order to express herself, it's not surprising that she is considered secondary and an accessory; it is in this apologetic pose that she operates and functions in work and society. As for our own culture, both Amalia Kahana-Carmon and S. Shifra identify this existential situation within the framework of Israeli culture, each of them explaining it from a different point of view - Jewish on the one hand and nationalist on the other.

Kahana-Carmon concretises the Israeli situation in literature, as a projection of the traditional stereotypes of the synagogue: just as the Jewish male stands at the centre of religious ritual, and through his prayers serves as "emissary of the community" (*shallach-hatsibur*), the community's spokesman before the holy ark - so the male Israeli author stands in the synagogue of literature, presenting his work as "one who stands in front of the Holy Ark in the

name of and on behalf of the people of Israel." Therefore, any subject he treats, whether national or personal, will serve as representative of the Israeli public as a whole; while whatever the woman, whose place in the synagogue is behind the partition of the women's section, writes will not be accepted as such. This claim, which maintains that prestigious status makes for prestigious literature, is likely to explain another phenomenon: the relegation of women writers, until the 80s, to the field of children's literature, and in lyric poetry (which men would allow them, without threatening their literary leadership), since sovereign leadership expressed itself first and foremost through novelistic, wide-scope writing, "depicting the events of the day through the experiences of a representative figure, or a string of representative figures, the lives of whom are meant to reflect the public's fate, values and aspirations".

S. Shifra also emphasises the subordinacy of the Israeli woman writer in her essays ("Author/ess as Witness," "Author or Authoress") and maintains that she is excluded from "depicting events through

the experiences of a representative figure," since she is not an active partner to these events, and is therefore disqualified as a witness: "It seems to me that a creative woman in our parts carries upon her back a double hump: women - in spite of the myths of equality and struggle, from the beginning of settlement in Israel, as well as during the wars which have since come and gone - are not active, equal partners. We may as well name things for what they are - she is not exposed to killing and being killed in battle. True, she is always akin to Abraham sending his son to the sacrificial altar; but she will never be akin to Isaac the Sacrifice. And, because of this, though reality is mostly to blame, her "testimony" is disqualified - for one of the central, painful foci of our lives is located outside her realm of experience." Moreover, even though women were actively involved in prestate Israel, and in the creation of the ethos of "settlement" and "security" (as well as the mythological figures of the "pioneer" and the "fighter"), they did not choose to express this as their own history, their own experiences.

Although in the beginning

of modern settlement in Israel, women did attempt to mix their generation's experiences into their work, these testimonials were few and incidental. The woman writer's chief preoccupation during this period was a search for her identity through her immediate surroundings.

As mentioned above, these initial feminist discussions began only in the 80s, on the part of authors as well as critics and academics. Lill Ratok, a researcher in this field, claims that a coherent female "Poetic - I", distinct from the male version, can be found in poetry, though the same is not true for fiction: "The Israeli fiction writer is almost always a man, and the model before a woman interested in fiction is male. Ratok's conclusion is that "the missing portrait of the woman fiction writer is a kind of negative goad in choosing this genre, and reflects the difficulty in creating a female literary model in fiction." In spite of this diagnosis, however, fiction written by women has gradually gathered force from the 80s onwards, both in terms of debut (more than 30) and ongoing work (about 10).

Why did it happen in the mid 80s?

(a) There is no doubt that the most effective spur was feminism, whose principles entered Israel as a fashionable ideological import from the West. Practically, positive response to feminist activism has been weak over the years, and women's movements have a small participant population; on the other hand, their militant activism has brought fundamental women's rights to both public and parliamentary attention: woman's sole ownership of her body; equal employment opportunities; legalised abortion (relative to other countries); and, most importantly, encouraging women to make their "voice" heard. From the 80s onwards this "voice" has indeed begun to be heard: it was heard in political declarations on the part of women and mothers, in Jewish-Arab conflicts, in various areas of public opinion, such as Women's Studies in the universities, and, of course, in increased female expression in various artistic fields.

Unlike the fanatical guarding of individual modesty, which distinguished women writers of the early State period, today's young women

writers advertise their liberation.

(b) The second process concerns a literary trend which began to emerge during the first half of the 80s, that is, post-modernism. Post-modernist writing liberated Hebrew literature from rigid, lofty norms. This liberalisation of literature no longer places the writer, *shallach-hatsibur*, as a model. There appear to be other options in fiction, to which the reading audience has responded enthusiastically. Though respect for representational fiction is firmly entrenched, alongside it, blooms a fiction which shakes itself free of any societal or missionary representation. This anti-representational approach is connected to the spirit of the times whose harsh socio-political developments have produced a cynical mood regarding all major forms of expression; the answer to this is neither rebellion nor breaking the mould, but a clinging to the bizarre, the fantastic, or even to the banal.

Needless to say, post-modernism's mischievous unfettering charmed women as well, and this, among other things, is precisely what helped them pave the way to

novelistic writing and eased their ambivalence to representational literature. Even given the mounting frustration between the "women's section" and the "Holy Ark," most of them do not become a feminist *shallach-hatsibur* for the canon, but choose instead non-canonic genres for their material, even when it is historical or social. This is probably a demonstrative act of liberation, or perhaps a means of temporarily exorcising novelistic writing. Either way they are taking a creative and active part in fashionable, contemporary expression, in works such as science fiction (Ruth Blomert), detective novels (Shulamit Lapid, Ora Shem-Or), travel literature (Yehudit Hendel, Elanora Lev), romantic novels (Hila Blum), or literary essays (Dorit Abush).

(c) The encouragement of women's writing, the undermining of norms, the license to expose, and the openness to non-canonic expression, have all been aided by a society with a prosperous lifestyle, leisure, and advanced technology. We see this first and foremost in the establishment of creative writing workshops taught by leading writers and poets

(there are four such study centres in Tel Aviv and others in Jerusalem and Haifa). Until the last decade, writing was not taught in Israel and was regarded as a personal need of the writer who struggled to learn how to write through reading or self-training. The creative writing workshop, meant to direct and professionally train, has also become part of Israeli leisure culture. This is not study for the sake of making a living or acquiring a lucrative profession, but men and women of solid economic standing (more than 50% are women) seeking to add a creative occupation to their existing occupation. Indeed, a large portion of women's fiction published in recent years has been cultivated and encouraged in these workshops (Savion Leibrecht, Ronit Matalon, Batina Peker, Balada Kalisher-Hazaz, and others). Just as a leisure culture makes creative writing easier, it also engenders a wider audience of book consumers; the number of women readers with time on their hands has grown. Accordingly, it is likely that publishers will encourage women's fiction for economic reasons, since it is likely to create a more in-demand market.

Women's presence is also considerable in fields auxiliary to the creative act such as literary research and criticism and the editing of newspaper literary supplements, journals, and publishing houses. As mentioned above, the study of the history of the woman writer and her place in Hebrew literature has become established (Nurit Guvrin, Lili Ratok, Tova Cohen, and others). There is also a proliferation of women critics (Ben Ezer, in his article "The Feminisation of Literature," marks this as a withdrawal, not an advance; he claims that men leave any profession which is not economically profitable, and that women are satisfied with gaining control over it). Indeed, editing, a position of power, influence, and income, has not yet advanced women to centre stage and they mostly serve as assistant editors of supplements and journals. The activity of women editors in publishing houses is also restricted: most of them handle children's literature, education, or, occasionally, poetry. There are nearly no women editors in fiction. Therefore, the Ministry of Defence's appointment of Shelly Alkeim to head the Tarmil series was

amazing. It seems that this appointment was among the first in a public publishing house (in private houses, such as Modan, Kinneret, and Or'Am, women work alongside their husbands and their influence over the choice of books brought to print is undoubtedly considerable). It is interesting to note that Shelly Alkeim's first publication, after her appointment, was women's fiction ("Woman Inside of Woman Inside" by Dorit Zilberman), a book which might not have been published by a male editor.

Participation of women writers is also growing in the Writers' Guild (out of 450 members, 115 are women, though this number does not include all women writers in Israel). Six, at this writing, out of seventeen members of the central committee are women, and women are also active on the Events' Committee, the Relief Committee, External Relations' Committee (always in a ratio of 25-30%).

However, the granting of awards to women writers, especially the Prime Minister's Prize, which allows for a year of writing without any additional work, is minimal. It is likely

that women writers do not initiate their own candidacy, or fail to create an encouraging and supportive environment; at any rate the matter arouses great anger among women writers every time prizes are awarded and women writers are not among the recipients.

In conclusion, we will finish with the question with which we began: Why, out of this plethora of female creativity, has no call unique to the Israeli woman burst forth from a Hebrew woman writer? Indeed, from accumulating and linking these various female expressions, novelistic as well as poetic, one can construct a kind of mosaic image of the Israeli woman writer in the 90s. But, as Rochelle Furstenberg claims ("To Dream of Flying"), unlike her American, Chinese, or Indian counterparts, the Israeli woman writer has not yet begun to inform her work with her own female history or mythology. It is not enough that the woman writer incorporates various genres and innovative and surprising poetics in her work: as long as she continues to deal with the mainstream and not herself - her own culture and representation as a woman - her image is still lacking.

Therefore, in sketching the contemporary state of women's literature in Israel, we will not describe a path wandering between the "women's section" and the "holy ark," in an attempt to present a female communal emissary; neither will we depict a literary revolution, or a feminisation of Israeli writing. In our view, women's literature is presently treading two paths. Upon one path women celebrate their

presence on the literary map, whatever its ways of expression may be. They do not apologise, nor do they belittle themselves, and as a result of their encouraging acceptance, they gain more and more self-confidence. The parallel path is searching, investigating, trying all the above-mentioned genres, the fashionable poetics, and all this - with the conscious or unconscious aim of freeing themselves from the literary

mainstream, and proposing alternative norms of their own.

About the Author

Dr Yaffa Berlowitz is a senior lecturer at Bar Ilan University, Tel Aviv, in the Dept. of Literatures of the Jewish People (19th Century Jewish Women Writers; Contemporary Women Writers in Hebrew).

Among Her Published Works

Women's Literature of the First Jewish Settlers in Palestine (1984)
The Supplementary (Essay) 1992
Travellers' Tales of the First Settlers in Palestine, 1992

EDITORIAL

Drop us a Line

This second issue of The Donkey is late by a month, a habit we would prefer not to get into. We hope 1994 eases us into a more "timely" routine. However, we have as an excuse the Dasain and Tihar festivals at the end of October and mid-November, but what the experience has taught us is to plan ahead.

We have also learned that there is a lot of interest in subscribing to The Donkey. Unfortunately, those of you who have sent cheques made them out to The Donkey, whereas they should have been made out to PEN Nepal. We are still trying to sort that one out with

the bank. In this issue, we have kept a subscription form. The yearly rate for 1994 will increase because we will bring out four issues, and we still request you to subsidise your poorer sisters. Those of you who joined in 1993 can still subscribe at Nepalese rupees 100, because, due to the lateness of this issue, the next will only appear at the end of March.

Those of you who live in the Region are asked to pay an annual subscription of Nepalese rupees 125, those outside US\$ 3.50 (including postage). Come and join us.

This issue features an

article from the Near East which was given to us through one of our delegates to the PEN Congress in Santiago de Compostela. It occurred to us that it struck a familiar chord for women writers in South Asia. Israel is, after all, in Asia, and I am sure many of you will be able to relate to what the writer is saying. It doesn't mean that we don't want to hear from women writers elsewhere. In Nepal, being an almost entirely mountainous country, we often wonder about women writers in the Andean Region. Can anyone hear us out there? If so, drop us a line.

Editor