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Book Review: Spoiling the Stories: The Rise of Israeli Women's Fiction

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This fascinating, absorbing, insightful book examines Israeli women's fiction for an Anglo-American audience. It raises many important questions such as "what does it mean to be an Israeli women writer in the face of the precedent of the male Hebrew canon?; What is the nature of what Judith Butler calls the "gender problematic" of the perspective of a primal authoritarian autonomous male writer's club?"; Can thoughtful dialogue with the Hebrew male literary canon provide new keys by which to open the closed world of the male literary establishment?"; What are the greater possibilities of female Israeli writing vis-à-vis the male canon?; What is at stake in deconstructing gender assumption that have led to the subjugation of women to passive docile roles?"; What does it mean to be a women writer?; Can the female writer sublimate the storms of her life in writing and transcend them by creativity?; How Is a feminist historiography of Hebrew prose possible?; What are the best strategies by which women Israeli writes can stretch gender boundaries and shake them up in the name of women's liberation?; How can Israeli women's fiction discover their own female voice, what Carol Giligin calls "in a different voice," and in this Derridean "difference" of alterity bring from the margins, women's perspectives to center stage?"

The female voice is the locus of Derridean difference. This post-modern discourse regarding the freedom of liberated expression of female voices as a feminist concern finds its subtext in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with the myth of "Narcissus and Echo" where Echo was robbed of the ability to voice her own thoughts after incurring the wrath of Juno. As Merin points out, referencing Edith Wharton's alleged debt to Henry James, Echo whose female voice has been taken from her represents the oppression of women who are not allowed to be the masters of their own voice and can exist only as the faded repetition of previous male authoritative voices representing male dominance over women. (4) Narcissus represents the male solipsistic self-referential ego that is in love with its own reflection in the mirror of the water. Merin is aware of the ancient trope of the mirror in chapter 10 of Plato's *Republic* whereby the art is seen as a reflection, or a mirror held up to nature. (63) Merin is also familiar with the more recent Julia Kristeva's notions of

identification that results from the mimesis between child and mother giving rise to not mimetic imitation but reduplication as “a jammed repletion” that explodes the Freudian paradigm by articulating the “imaginary father” who proceeds the Oedipal male paradigmatic drama, who is a combination of mother and father. For example Amalia Kahana-Carmon in *Lev ha-kaitz, Lev ha-or* (Heart of the Summer, Heart of light) draws on Chaim Nchman Bialik’s *ars poetica* verse, which contains female components. Kahana embraces Bialik as a poetic imaginary father, in addition to Uri Nissan Gneissin and Micha Josef Berdyczewski [Berdichevsky,] her imaginary father’s in prose.

Merin draws on the Laconian reception history of this idea in the concept of the mirror stage. This mirror reflection certainly can be traced earlier in Homer’s *Iliad* where Patroklos sees his reflection in Achilles shield or Milton’s Eve who achieves self-consciousness by meditating on her image in a pond of water. Merin brilliantly transforms the Ovidean Echo myth to show that it poignantly represents the paradigm by which new women prose writers, often confront, and are up against an authoritative male literary tradition that threatens to take away the voices of aspiring female literary artists. Merin questions the *ars poetica* for an alternative feminine literary tradition, searching for a reflection in the mirror of the previously absent mother, which is a metaphor for Yehudit Hendel’s own search for the reflection of the mother in the mirror as an expression of the longing to recuperate an influential literary history of the mother-daughter-sister in the history of Hebrew literature. Merin wonders if the absence of the representation of the mother of valor in the mirror of art is largely due to the paucity of influential women prose writers in Israeli literature preceding Hendel.

The book particularly focuses on three Israeli women prose writers: Yehudit Hendel (1926-2014), Amalia Kahana-Carmon (1926-), and Rachel Eytan (1931–1987) who all in their writing open up a feminine element if not missing, absent, passed over, then made marginal by the male Hebrew canon. Merin writes, “All three authors established their poetic fingerprints by writing within a male and inherently Oedipal model of literary influence.” (77) A difference between Hendel and Kahana is noted however when Merin writes “As opposed to Hendel who conducted an intersexual dialogue with Agnon, employing a melancholic process of internalizing the mother within the father, Kahana-Carmon looks straight into the eyes of the father figures of

modern Hebrew literature, identifying with them, seeking to take part in their groundbreaking poetic processes, while at the same time unmanning them- challenging their authority and primacy (80).”

The first chapter of the book examines the early prose fiction of Hendel written during the historical context of the 1948 statehood generation. While Gershon Shaked in his *Ha-siporet ha-Ivrit 1880-1980* (Hebrew Fiction 1880-1980) comments that “Hendel is closer to Kahana-Carmon and Yehoshua Knaz than the group of (1948) realistic writers with whom she shared her beginnings in “Anashim aherim hem.” Merin notes that “feminist criticism of the 1990s and 2000s exposed the gender bias of these studies” (35) and Merin situates her in the 1948 generation although nonetheless a female outsider to this male club (35) following the position of Yael Feldman in the “face of the doomed attempt to integrate Hendel into the existing male-Oedipal historiography.” (36) Yet, Hendel reaches out not to her contemporary male dominated writers so much, but engages in a generational skipping act to embrace Agnon as a literary grandfather figure, who the current 1948 generation may view as antiquated and an antiquarian diaspora Jew who continued to cling to outdated religiosity, tradition, and memories of the customs and mindset of the old country in Eastern Europe. While many of the 1948 generation may have felt Agnon was just “too Jewish,” Hendel engages in dialogue with Agnon and admires his art, and embraces Agnon’s almost “feminine” otherness found in his *oeuvre*. It was because of Hendel’s husband the artist painter Zvi Mairovich, whom she describes at the end of his life in *Ha-Koah ha-aher* (The Other Power) that she came to even meet Agnon. Merin argues that Hendel’s marginality to her own generation of writers allowed her to innovate new ideological and poetic developments and be at the forefront of literary change. (37) The macho image of the *sabra* was to bury the exilic past and to cure the sick diaspora Jew. (53) The rift caused by rebellion of the 1948 statehood generation of writers plays into the Oedipal rebellion against the father. Hendel’s melancholic intersexual dialogue according to Merin allowed her to read Agnon anew. For Merin, Hendel re-imagined Agnon as a different kind of literary father, one that can be understood in the light of Kristeva’s notion of the imaginary father, who incorporates both motherly and fatherly attributes. (50) Hendel’s intersexual dialogue with Agnon’s “Agunot” is especially evident in her book *Re’hov ha- madregot*. (57) Like Agnon’s Dina, Hendel’s Dina

loses her beloved, her husband Shmuel, who is killed in battle. Merin finds it not accidental that Agnon reveals his association of the publication of “Agunot” with longing for his dying mother. Following his mother’s passing in May of 1909, Agnon confessed his sense of guilt and the pain he felt he had caused his own dying mother who was left behind in exile. Merin concludes, “thus the feminine melancholic affinity with the absent mother goes to the heart of the literary paradigm which Agnon constituted for Hendel, offering a substantial deviation from his patriarchal literary persona usually portrayed in Hebrew scholarship.” (66) Merin argues that the melancholic dialogue with Agnon became the organizing logic of Hendel’s poetics even in her work as late as the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

The second chapter treats Kahana-Carmon’s in what Merin calls “intersexual dialogue“ with Kristevian “imaginary literary secular grandfathers” of modernity. Kahana’s contemporary writers included A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, and Yitzhak Orpaz. Yet, Kahana in her early prose chose to return to citations ripe with allusions to the work of Agnon, Gneissin, Berdichevsky, and Bialik. Gershon Shaked in *Gal hadash ba-siporet ha-Ivrit* (A New Wave in Hebrew Fiction) notes that Kahana is unique in this new wave generation for bridging the old and new. (77) Shaked also notes that Kahana uniquely established the self-awareness of women’s literature as a female author (78) running against the tradition of the exclusion, repression, and subjugation of women from the Hebrew Israeli canon. (78) Merin analyzes the character of Ne’ima Sasson who falls in love with her teacher Ezekiel. In this love story Kahana marks the transition from the longing of Ne’ima for the father figure Ezekiel— as reflected in her early poetry, to a dialogic writing in prose considered a more mature form of expression. The plot evolves by Ne’ima turning her back on lyric confessional feminine poetry and independently developing her talents in writing prose free of being under the magic spell of her infatuation for her teacher. Merin compares Kahana’s story “Ne’ima Sasson kotevet Shirim” with Agnon’s “In the Prime of Her Life,” which also reveals the hero as the writer of the text, and everything that has appeared up to this point has been chosen and edited by her. Both stories have at their center a young female student of Hebrew, whose failed love affair with her teacher is ultimately overshadowed by her literary initiation into independent creative endeavors. (87) Many Israeli women writers including Dalia Ravikovitch admitted to having been deeply influenced by Kahana, and her

name comes upon in many feminist discussions of women's writing. Thus for Merin, Kahana's prose demonstrates the radical potential of intersexual dialogue, undermining literary and gender hierarchies, rescuing the female text from its splendid isolation (think of Bialik's poem *Alone*) within the Hebrew canon, while at the same time unmanning the cannon itself. (110)

The third chapter is an examination of Rachel Eytan's fiction of the 1960s and 1970s which according to Merin represents a Kristevan "jammed" return to the Hebrew male *Kunstlerroman*. Her first novel, *The Fifth Heaven*, draws autobiographically on Eytan's own lived experience of growing up in an orphanage. Despite her abuse, Eytan holds out the potential of art to transcend the imperfections and vicissitudes of life, not as mindless escapism, but rather through redemption of the artistic literary process itself. For example, the main character asks a counselor who sexually abuses her to buy her some paper and writing tools so that she may write stories not as psychological therapy but to find existential meaning regarding her situation, and transcend it in the perfection art holds out. If life is not beautiful, then art can be in its internal coherence and how each part of a literary construct fits sublimely together as parts in a complex refined clock. Merin shows that Eytan's second novel led to her banishment from the Israeli literary scene because its liberated post-1960s sexual revolution gave expression to the female libido that shocked not only gender norms, but also senses of discretion, correctness, appropriateness, and decorum.

The epilogue explores the new directions in intersexual dialogue in the feminist ad postmodern 1990s and 2000s by focusing on novelist Zeruya Shalev whose fiction entails self-conscious humorous intersexual dialogues with imaginary fathers.

The struggle to establish the state of Israel gave rise to literary expressions by writers, the 1948 generation, or Palmach generation, such as Moshe Shamir, Yigal Mosinzon, Matti Meged, Hayim Guri, Aharon Meged and others. Merin suggests there is a strong relationship between the nationalism of this generation and machoistic models of manhood, and writing itself. This generation of male writers represented the strong Zionist collective embodied by the figure of the Israeli *sabra*, who replaced the effeminate *talush*, by draining the Hulda swamps, planting orange groves, and other types of hard manual labor.

Merin points out that the figure of the sexually passive diaspora Jew, the *talush* (uprooted man) still had one stereotypically male characteristic (of the Haskalah): the ability to write in Hebrew. (14) For Merin, Agnon represents a most unique and special place in this patriarchal pantheon of Hebrew writers, along with, Genissin, and Berdichevsky who she refers to as the grandfathers of Hebrew prose.

The beginning of Modern Hebrew literature can be traced to the Haskalah period, influenced by the Masklim (or Jewish Enlightenment thinkers) which ran from roughly 1780 to 1880, with their emphasis on refined Hebrew and attention to *dikduk* (grammar). The first Hebrew novel that is frequently referenced is Abraham Mapu's (1808-1867) *Ahavat Sion* (The Love of Zion) published in 1853, which represents the beautiful transformation of Biblical Hebrew into the novel genre. Other significant Hebrew prose works appeared in the final two decades of the 19th century, known as the literature of the revival or Renaissance (*sifrut ha-Tehiya*) which is the historical point of departure for Merin's study of three female prose writers. Early 20th century Hebrew literature, sometimes located in the periodization of modernism, often gave voice to nationalist themes and ideologies. Yet, Merin suggests that it often excluded or marginalized Jewish women from this evolving revolutionary movement in history of Hebrew fiction. (5) An example is Dvora Baron (1887-1956), whose Hebrew short stories were not well received by the male establishment even though the book *Hebrew, Gender, and Modernity: Critical Responses to Devorah Baron's Fiction* tries to show how Baron made a daring attempt to enter the male canon, rather than challenge it from outside. (23) Merin writes, "this exclusion (in general for all women prose writers) had a decisive effect on the entrance of women into the canon of Hebrew literature. Furthermore it shaped and molded the modern Hebrew canon itself, perpetuating strong relations of influence between male writers that continued after the move to the Land of Israel." (5) Merin shows that the common false assumption in feminist Hebrew literary scholarship is that it was not until the 1980s that women emerged as Hebrew prose writers, while women poets like Rachel Bluwstein (1890-1931), Leah Goldberg (1911-1970), and Elisheva Bikhovsky (1888-1949) and others played into the stereotype that men wrote Hebrew prose and women Hebrew poetry. According to Merin, Pnina Shirav's study of Hendel, Kahana-Carmon,

and Ruth Almog perpetuates the common misconception that Israeli women's prose fiction was resurrected in the 1980s as a gendered literature *ex nihilo*.

Merin sees the symbolic nature of the portrait of Peretz Smolenskin, the *maskilic* writer, hanging in the Strashun's library in Vilna – one of the largest libraries of the Jewish world during the Haskalah – as a striking metaphor of poetic and national fatherhood. (13) The Haskalah act to replace religious texts with the secular texts of modernity may represent an Oedipal act. Likewise, the three women writers, Hendel, Kahana-Carmon and Eytan, are anti-religious. Yet, in that they look to Agnon as a literary grandfather, and the fact that Agnon who began publishing in the 1910s was a literary representative sensitive to and insider of old Jewish religious tradition, makes these three women rejection of Jewish religion problematic. Agnon does not fit into the model of the secular Haskalah writer who substitutes a secular *Ahad Ha'am* text for the religious texts of his ancestors. Perhaps the tendency of Agnon to adopt a female point of view in a number of his literary works makes Agnon, despite his perceived religiosity and being a representative of the old country, a certain participant in intersexual dialogue with the three women writers. (28) However, while conflict between the old religious world and the new Zionist secular mentality fuels much of Agnon's writing, in the writing of Hendel, Kahana-Carmon, and Eytan radical engagement with gender, liberated sexuality, and the female voice predominate.

In the epilogue, Merin seeks to “broaden Shaked's definition of the grandfather adoption model but at the same time challenge its Oedipal bias in an attempt to explore its gender fluid aspects, allowing the grandfathers to transform into imaginary (Kristeva's lexicon) fathers a la Kristeva: motherly fathers who question the stern, authoritarian father figure most associated with the Oedipal model. (26)“ Merin asks, “Is the metaphor of authoritative literary parenthood - whether motherhood or fatherhood – indisposable when it comes to literary influence? Or as recently proposed by Chana Kronfeld can we acknowledge poetic and historical agency without enforcing an authoritative hierarchy between supposedly strong and weak, late and early authors...Is it possible to investigate not only the referencing of the Hebrew canon by Hebrew female authors, but also the late work of Hebrew female authors as shaping and molding, post-facto, the canonical fathers themselves?” (6) Merin essentially expands the gendered Oedipal models of

literary influence in Modern Hebrew literature by rejecting and exploding the stereotype of the primal authoritative tyrannical father text, and the submissive, admiring, diminutive daughter text. (9) In unmanning the male Hebrew canon, these three women writers cross gender assumptions by engaging in intersexual dialogue, which allows them to get at the gender blind spot at the heart of the Hebrew male canon. These three writers thus opened up the male canon paving the way for the 1960s new wave literary generation characterized by Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, alongside which Kahana wrote. Merin argues that the alleged boom of Israeli female fiction of the 1980s did not come out of nowhere, rather the book shows that it had begun to develop three decades earlier in works of Hendel, Kahana-Carmon, and Eytan. Merin further argues an earlier rise of Female prose Hebrew fiction than had previously been assumed by situating its rise in the 1950s to the 1970s. She suggests that the three women writers established their formative place in Israeli literature through a complex and conflicted intersexual dialogue with the Hebrew canon. (24)

Writing in English about Hebrew women's writing is relatively rare, which ironically is another testimony to the thesis of the unfortunate marginality of women creative artists in the literary scene. This book should be included to bring from the margins to center stage those streams of literary creativity that have been the victim of discrimination, bias, and the refusal to grapple with gender issues, female sexuality, feminist concerns, and unshackling female voices. Yet, the work stands on its own as an insightful, intellectual, well written, well organized thesis that convincingly makes its case that crucial decades in the previously unexplored history of the Israeli women's literary writing in Hebrew should have their story told, appreciated, and learned from.

The book required the quoting and paraphrasing of large passages of Hebrew but all quotations from Hebrew are translated into English.