

## *Perspective and Protest*

*Review-Essay by ZVIA GINOR*

*Eve's Journey. Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition.* By NECHAMA ASCHKENASY. Philadelphia. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986. 269 pp.

*Israeli Mythogonies. Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction.* By ESTHER FUCHS. Albany. State University of New York Press, 1987. 147 pp.

THE APPLICATION OF FEMINIST LITERARY criticism to Hebrew literature could be beneficial to the general reader inasmuch as it is a re-reading of that literature from a new viewpoint. As the methods of criticism change and develop they allow for insights and interpretations which should lead, at least theoretically, to a fuller understanding and appreciation of a work of art. The enlistment of extra-literary knowledge is bound to enhance criticism, as we have seen from the perspectives that the sciences of anthropology, linguistics and psychology have added. However, every new method is stamped by an intended or unintended bias and should be seen, therefore, as an alternative, rather than the ultimate, reading. Feminist literary criticism has yet to arrive at a coherent, systematic theory. Torn and upset by disagreements on fundamental issues, this approach suffers from a number of confusions, the primary one being the question of conflicting allegiances: is this kind of criticism loyal, first and foremost, to literature and aesthetics or to feminist causes of morality and politics.<sup>1</sup>

With this basic precaution in mind, one may proceed to evaluate two recent titles which offer both perspectives and protest concerning the treatment of the female character in Hebrew fiction. One should note, at the outset, that both works, different as they are from each other, set out to study fiction only, a field dominated mostly by male authors, and consciously refrain from the large poetic activity of both men and women during this last century. Whether this fact represents

1. Peter Shaw, "Feminist Literary Criticism, a Report from the Academy," *American Scholar*, 8/88.

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the need to protest or the technical boundaries of the present volumes remains to be seen in future works.

Whereas the feminist movement produced a great number of studies in France, England and the United States during the '70s, these two titles are basically the first to undertake Hebrew literature, although both were written and published in the United States and are not yet available to the Israeli Hebrew reader. Only in the spring of 1988 did Israel see, for the first time, a conference of literary scholars and authors that was dedicated to the subject of "The Literature of Women" (notice the ambiguity of the terminology, which, indeed, was reflected at the conference, wavering among women writers, female characters in fiction, and the inclusion or exclusion of books written by women in the so-called "canon" of Hebrew literature). Thus, these books are welcomed as pioneering the field, inhabiting the empty shelf which is soon to be stocked with specific readings of individual women authors like Dvora Baron and the poet, Esther Rabb.

Even in the writing of this review the issue of practical criticism finds itself entangled in the plight of women, Jewish and not Jewish, who, in their attempt to rectify a traditional error make a case which is, by its very nature, extra-literary. It is important, therefore, to evaluate these two works in the light of their contribution to the study of literature, rather than in terms of their basic allegiance to the ulterior social-political agenda.

Nehama Aschkenasy, the Director of the program of Judaic studies and Middle Eastern Affairs at the University of Connecticut, presents a broad and encompassing survey of feminine images in the Hebraic literary tradition, following their premiere appearances in the Bible and their metamorphosis through the Midrash, the literature of mysticism, Hasidic tales, and on to current fiction. She creates a gallery of prototypes and social positions of women like Dinah, Hannah and Ruth, and purports to study their evolution, variations, mutations, and expansions throughout the corpus of Jewish literature. By painstakingly suggesting new readings of the initial biblical text, and analyzing the recycling in later periods, Ms. Aschkenasy organizes them into a sort of linear progression. Such a reading implies a view of Jewish literature as a progressing continuum, in which each step is a product of its predecessor.

Prototype or Archetype — The texts chosen by Ms. Aschkenasy are those which either introduce a new perspective on an ancient female figure, or introduce a new fictional creation which is revealed to include an earlier prototype in its construct. The variety of feminine experiences in Hebrew literature seems to have a common feature, says Ms. Aschkenasy, which is the depiction of women as "the other." Beginning with the *Sitra Ahra*, the "other side," which encompasses the forces of darkness in man and in the universe, and continuing through the so-

biological "other" (as the cause for sin or as the symbols of virtue), women were viewed as an entity apart from the male world. This common element shifted and changed, however, in reaction to the events of Jewish history, when Jews themselves were considered "the other" by the Gentiles.

There is no denial that the Bible displays an underlying patriarchal orientation, reflecting a male dominant world view as well as social system. But it would be simplistic to say that the Bible deliberately promotes male dominion and female subordination (p. 9).

Ms. Aschkenasy claims that Biblical law neither created nor championed male supremacy, but merely responded to a given reality. By offering a close and a fresh reading of many biblical tales, she points out the existence of both male chauvinistic attitudes as well as egalitarian attitudes in the Bible. In fact, it is when the biblical stories are compared with contemporaneous texts (such as Gilgamesh), or with later texts which comment on them, that its non-sexist bent is discovered.

Not so with the literature of the Midrash, which takes the biblical Eve, presented as an agent of civilization, and reintroduces her as a "retarding element," corrupting and debasing life. It is hard to say "that the rabbinic Midrash lacks sympathy for women, but its main orientation is clearly patriarchal" (p. 16).

The Kabbalah, however, reveals a paradoxical attitude toward women; on the one side, the deity is expanded to include the Shekhinah, the feminine element in God, while, on the other side, women are seen as having a demonic quality. This paradox is explained by Ms. Aschkenasy in light of the Kabbalistic, ultra-realistic view of the world, where women were used as symbols of the cosmological and the psychological "other," including both the sublime and the debased.

In the next historical stage of Jewish literature, the medieval Golden Age of Hebrew poetry, women seem to have been regarded as human beings, described as flesh and blood figures, as the subject of love and eros, much in the tradition of the romantic poetry of Arabic Spain. However, the author points out, reducing women to their sexual function is only a variation of the previous attitude.

As literature was produced exclusively by men, the portrayal of women as "other" remains unchanged. This is true in the Responsa literature, where they become the objects of legal discussion, and in later Hasidic literature where women are divested of humanity and invested with abstract theological concepts, cosmological powers, and psychological forces within men. It is only during the Enlightenment period that female figures begin to appear as life-size, but, alas, only as agents of the writers' ideology; they remain as literary characters and are, generally, flat.

Eve's odyssey into the modern era opens up possibilities above and beyond her traditional sub-human or larger-than-human dimensions.

Not yet totally liberated from these submerged images, modern Hebrew writers, male and female, tend to portray women as the paradigm for Israel — as the metamorphosis of the biblical Zion, mother, daughter, or land. However, the modern women protagonists are redeemed from their traditional secondary literary role and are portrayed as seeking individual redemption, as embarking on self-expression and self-assertion. Eve's journey is not complete, concludes Ms. Aschkenasy, but she has definitely escaped from the cultural silence and the self-imposed segregation which resulted from it. "At the same time, the tension between earlier myths and new realities becomes the challenge that awaits both male and female writers" (p. 256).

Many of the modern literary works that are cited and analyzed by Ms. Aschkenasy are also interpreted by Esther Fuchs. While the first presents modern Hebrew literature in a historical progression and the images of Eve on a scale of metamorphosis, Ms. Fuchs focuses on the contemporary. Their readings, therefore, differ in both purpose and conclusion. While Ms. Aschkenasy offers a perspective, Ms. Fuchs offers a protest against the blind spots and the conscious attempts at trivialization and exclusion of Israeli women authors from the canon. The books also differ by temperament, implementation, conviction, and degree. To the student of literature and for the general reader, *Eve's Journey* would be refreshing and enlightening reading. To the critics of Jewish literature, *Israeli Mythogynies* is a challenging call for a re-evaluation on the basis of a strong "new criticism" approach and a political commitment. It is a work that engages in the long-overdue battle against the neglect of women as protagonists, as authors, and as critics.

In her most eloquent introduction, Ms. Fuchs describes the field of Hebrew Literary Criticism as resisting feminist political criticism, holding a dismissive attitude toward feminist criticism and considering the sexual politics metaphor only in its relevance to the national one, thus reducing the works to a possible allegorical interpretation. Women authors are excluded from anthologies, even in translations, creating the impression that they do not exist or are devoid of merit. One of the explanations offered by Ms. Fuchs suggests that feminist critique of major authors is perceived as threatening "because a radical feminist inquiry is likely to point up the valuative contingencies underlying the formation of the canon" (p. 8).

The main body of her work consists of an analysis of the characteristics of the so called "generation of statehood," as distinguished from its predecessor, "The Palmah Generation," and is followed by an interpretation of A.B. Yehoshua's and Amos Oz's feminine characters, leading to the "re-visioning" of Amalia Kahana-Carmon.

In addition to her very precise style and scientific terminology, Ms. Fuchs creates neologisms for her underlying ideology. The poignancy of her argument is nurtured by the very fact that her work focuses

on current literary activities in modern Israel where one assumes that traditional female images would be abandoned and rejected, just as so many other traditional concepts were. She points out the thematic transformations from the socialist-realist "engaged" literature of the fifties to the personal, universal and subjective "New Wave." Yehoshua and Oz, representing the next generation, who employ ambiguity and artistic allegory, actually have not modified the previous models of feminine representation: "What served as an allegorical degenerating society were gynecologies of mad, materialistic and hedonistic women bent on the destruction of the male protagonist or the natural self" (p. 14).

If the male protagonist of the previous generation was absorbed in national dilemmas, the New Wave male protagonists struggle with existential ones. Yet, in neither case is the woman a part of these struggles. Whether she functions as wife or lover, she does not partake in the meaningful or fundamental issues of the historical and problematic situation of modern Israel.

A.B. Yehoshua, focusing on the private sphere, continues some of the Palmah Generation traditions in combining the narrative art form with social criticism. His women are passive, male-dependent, unable to think. The role of women, then, remains in an auxiliary status. Although his women are less stereotypical and less marginal than others, they are still a product of what Ms. Fuchs calls "the androcentric imagination" inasmuch as they are attached to the domestic sphere and are not involved in the "meaning" of existence.

Amos Oz, whose world-view is defined as perceiving a dialectic between civilization and nature, or culture and chaos, identifies women with nature and chaos. If his women characters are in any significant way different from Yehoshua's it is because they are viewed as "others" also in the political sense.

There is, however, a unique aspect in Oz's gyniconology that reflects a specifically Israeli set of anxieties and preoccupations. His heroines are . . . not merely the traitors of their husbands and children; they also betray their country. . . . Woman emblemizes the self destructive impulse which Amos Oz perceives to be Israel's real problem (pp. 84, 85).

What Ms. Fuchs suggests as a "genographic re-vision" is the rather celebrated work of Israel's foremost woman author, Amalia Kahana-Carmon. Despite the recognition that she has received, the critical consensus focuses on her style, her "how," and is reticent about her "what." In Ms. Fuchs' theory, this critical ambivalence is related to the conventional identification of universality with masculinity; thus, Kahana-Carmon's work, which is feminine, is secondary. Her interest in traditional female role models as literary objects places her on the path already paved by Dvora Baron and others. However, this tendency of Ms. Fuchs to see the literary tradition in terms of its author's gender

may be a dangerous fallacy.<sup>2</sup> Kahana-Garmon rejected the heroic model of the Palmah Generation yet did not espouse the ironic or symbolic approach of the New Wave writers. Her work stands out, therefore, as a challenge to the “androcentric gyniconology of the other.”

By restoring conscience and consciousness to the mimetic aspect of the female image and by studying its complexities, she is challenging the androcentric tendency to present woman as a void, a sexual object, or a male adjunct (p. 92).

In a fascinating comparison between Noa Talmon and Hana Gonen, characters created by Kahana-Carmon and Amos Oz respectively, Ms. Fuchs presents these authors' viewpoints (sympathetic vs. ironic), stressing the male oriented tendency to regard women as having an inherent disorder which comes with their gender; thus, the psychological growth of the heroine is ignored as a possible explanation for her neurosis.

By focusing on these three authors, Esther Fuchs herself introduces a re-visionist theory of the “subtly implied” dismissive attitude towards women authors in the Hebrew literary academy. She actually sounds a battle cry against the established situation and, particularly, against the explicit declaration of the poet, David Avidan, whose “phallocratic assumptions about the alleged supremacy of the male unity” have recently shattered the literary community.

The fundamental question which arises from this study is whether men are at all capable of presenting a non-androcentric portrayal of women. Or, perhaps, whether women authors can represent a non-androcentric portrayal of men. In other words, the benefits of this approach to literature are undoubted so long as we do not become the victims of our own viewpoint, so long as we test the theory for all human possibilities. As it is, we have not seen in any of these books an example of what Ms. Fuchs calls “pluralistic” expression, unless it was written by a female. If this is, indeed, the ultimate conclusion, we are, then, entrapped on many levels. The field, however, is still new and open to the expansion of this approach. It is to be hoped that this will be achieved by a variety of critical methodologies which could insure “pluralism” or, at the very least, a dialogue.

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2. Ibid.