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Between ravens and cuckoos!

By Hannah Naveh

"Ha'orvim" ("The Ravens") by Avirama Golan, Hasifriya Hahadasha, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 183 pages, NIS 79.!

The long history of literature written by men and about men (which is the history of literature in general) shows that there is a connection between the sex/gender of the author and the sex/gender of the story's primary agent - what we call "the hero," or its antithesis, the "anti-hero." "Anna Karenina" and "Madame Bovary" were written by men; so were S.Y. Agnon's "In the Prime of Her Life" and Amos Oz's "My Michael." !

I will allow myself to voice some reservations here about the sweeping consensus that these authors were successful in their attempt to step into the shoes and souls of Anna, Emma, Agnon's Tirtza and Oz's Hannah. It is hard, if not impossible, to assume that they found a place free and cleansed of their own sex and gender from which to coax words out of these women, to represent their physical and mental worlds. More likely, they found a place from which to express the woman's voice according to the patriarchal model - a woman who follows stereotypes of sex and gender that were invented, cemented and reproduced by men and have been so deeply internalized by women that they are considered women's "authentic" expression. !

It is even more likely that we have all internalized the idea of "femininity," modeling ourselves, among other things, after these literary masterpieces. And so we had Anna, who surrendered herself to an all-consuming and destructive love, in violation of good taste and common opinion - and was punished for it; and we had Emma, who ravenously abandoned herself to destructive, romantic dreams that flew in the face of bourgeois order - and was punished for it; and Tirtza, who with a mule-like stubbornness embraced a destructive irrationality, contrary to the opinions of all those who had her best interests at heart - and was punished for it; and Hannah, who gave herself over to destructive delusions and daydreams that clashed with scientific logic - and was punished for it. !

And so we are all fated to fulfill the fantasy of ultimate femininity while consenting to the punishment that awaits those women who succeed. After all, these women all heeded a demand perceived as being an authentic part of the female essence, whether in their choices and preferences (how feminine!) or in the fervor and absolute

devotion with which they pursued these choices (how feminine!). All are marked by a kind of unbridled lust, some blindness, something underdeveloped and seemingly immature. In the process, all of these women affirm over and over the ancient belief in women's "otherness," and in the end they assure men that order will prevail. Even women write about such women - why not? It seems to be a winning move. !

! And since we have no other place from which to write - having yet to find the path to that pre-gender place, the place of the universal human being that Virginia Woolf longed for in "A Room of One's Own" (although she claimed otherwise in "Three Guineas") - women, too, write from within gender prejudices and stereotypes. After all, femininity itself is a concept that women did not define; nor did they establish its "authentic" experiences. The basic logic of defining the feminine rests on the separation of materials (qualities, characteristics, experiences) that culture values from those it does not, and their inclusion, respectively, in the identities of men and women. However, a critical awareness of this exclusive, oppressive position might encourage women who write (and, to a lesser degree of genuine experience, men who write) to create narratives with varying degrees of polarity and of resistance to this normative division of human resources. Stories of this kind engage in a dialogue with the meta-narratives of gender. Often they give poignant, original expression to pieces of life and hidden corners that have not yet been shredded by the machine of the male gaze and turned into royal jelly, the nourishment of kings. The secret life of bees ...!

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Reservoir of images!

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And so, like many other women authors, Avirama Golan writes of the secret life of women. The story is about families, with their loves and hatreds; about men and women, girls and boys; about the margins of the city (those satellite towns known in Israel as krayot) and the heart of Israeliness (the kibbutz); about soldiers in combat units and those sitting behind desks; about work relations and sexual relations. This menu, the same one found in most masterpieces, is presented here from multiple female perspectives, as has been the case in many other Israeli women's novels of the last years. The effort to deconstruct the general term "motherhood" into a space of alternatives and a site of struggle, on which this story is focused, has also become a trademark of Israeli women's writing. !

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The story itself is rife with stereotypes: the old-new immigrant, who never adjusts and remains an eternal outsider to all forms of Israeliness; and, by contrast, the kibbutznik founding mother, self-righteous and aggressive, whose daughter resists her at every turn; the Jewish mother and her range of castration techniques, from smothering with attention to smothering with indifference; the ex-kibbutz member who marries a Mizrahi (someone whose family originated in the Middle East) as revenge against the kibbutz and her

mother; the home renovation that occurs at the very moment when the family itself breaks down; the illustrious naval commando, who revives the camaraderie of his famed unit to dazzle us, yet again, with the power of a sacred blood brotherhood; the national bereavement for the dead and its powers of mobilization; an adulterous affair and the resulting guilt; the mature woman who becomes addicted to the love of a greedy, uncaring young man; the signs of Israeli yuppie-ness in a television production company; and so on. All this adds up into a "good story" - readable, flowing and interesting. It is also well-written, with a light hand and in believable Hebrew.!

! But the wisdom of "Ha'orvim" ("The Ravens") lies elsewhere; so does its uniqueness as a woman's novel and a feminine novel. These are found, in my opinion, in sporadic moments of drama that have the power to hoist up the entire story and shake the stiffness out of our reading. The story has wondrous moments of revelation, briefly illuminating female experiences that cannot be predicted and are hard to conceptualize as being either for or against women. These are the experiences and insights of a search for language, for "words with which to say it." They involve a groping for a different kind of speech and an inability to position oneself inside the reservoir of images with which women and femininity are traditionally represented. !

! Jenia with her underpants down, sitting at length, tormented and sorry, on the toilet seat, her gray-brown stockings bunched around her ankles - who knows her? Who understands? The same Jenia, who while having sex with her husband, cries in her heart "no touching, no touching" - who knows her? Who understands? This Jenia, whose appearances in the book are usually linked to her maternal failures, and who herself has lost a mother and needs her sheltering touch. And Didi, who grumbles angrily at Shimon's sudden interest in the renovation budget after years of leaving all household affairs to her - who knows her? Who understands? Like a starving man she stares at the beauty of young girls, though not in envy (as we have been taught to understand our observation of young, taut-skinned girls - hatred, jealousy, like that head nurse in Agnon's story, "who never looked at a girl unless she imagined her with her flesh half-eaten"). !

! And Ricky - who can understand Ricky beyond the labels of "easy," "sleeps around," "the collective slut"? Ricky, who was once the little girl Rivkale, who felt while performing her seductive gyrations that "Rivkale was far away from her, folded in a box and buried in the ground. Rivkale would not have understood where this Ricky had come from." Does she know that she is echoing her mother (no touching, no touching), as well as Didi (whose female boss tells her she sends out a "hands off" signal), and Shimon's mother (who closes herself off as though she were inside a coffin) - all those who experienced the violence of growing into womanhood? !

! How is it possible to wrest from cultural memory the disheartening image of the woman as eternal child - undeveloped, immature,

incapable of attaining complete adulthood (epitomized by Tirza Nir, who died when she was 6) - to make room for the woman's own delicate, honeyed longing to be an eternal child (like Didi, when Rafi strokes her head "in the old rhythm, known only to the two of them, his hand moving slowly, and Didi's head, shrieking with pain, gratefully recognized the touch and responded to it with yearning. The years fell away like a shell, leaving only a stubborn, angry little girl with no one to hold her and a boy, anointed with power and love, sure of himself and of the surrounding world, a born prince, who says things to her")? How do you turn "the woman's disease," which is her femaleness, into a positive identity?!

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Parallel plots!

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The wisdom of the book, then, is not its structure, as other critics have claimed; indeed, there are two parallel plots, conveyed separately, in alternating segments, until they finally unite toward the end of the book. We've seen this in many other literary works, and any seasoned reader expects the two plots to come together long before they do. The thematic focus provided by the motif of ravens and swallows is also not a new invention, either in its specific location in the story, within the consciousness of the young girl Ya'ara, or in the kind of content it evokes - the two models of nesting and mothering. In my opinion, the book's wisdom lies in its ability to destabilize the stereotypes and preexisting patterns that we bring to reading such a story. After all, it is so easy to fall into the trap of such models - the guilt-inducing Jewish mother, the castrating mother, the hysterical mother, the mother who worries too much, and so on. !

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In an act of great intuition (graphic designer Yael Schwartz deserves high praise for choosing the Rik Wouters painting), the image on the book's cover is the portrait of a young woman, her eyes black-azure, wearing a red dress, a white kerchief on her head and a white cape covering her shoulders (as if to remind us that the red riding hood is a garment with gendered, political and ideological implications). She stands on a street corner, or perhaps near a window looking out to the street, her back to the wall, withdrawn and curled inward into her body and her fears, her shoulders and arms sheltering the property of her selfhood. !

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Who is she? Even the fist, after all, was once an open palm with fingers. It is the woman a moment before she takes the step that will bring her into the world. It is the open palm, a moment before it is clenched into a fist. It is all the women who are shredded into stereotypes that are already waiting for them at birth, having waited since long before the women chose how to be and what to be. Jenia's moans and whimpers lend themselves easily to her portrait as a disgusting, hysterical, hypochondriac, manipulative woman, who loathes having sex with her husband (a mark against her, of course - how typical of the "Polish" wife). The ears, therefore, are not really open to hear what goes on there: !

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"Like a pale corpse, in a crisp, starched white nightgown, she would lie in silence on the metal bed. Only the mattress, stuffed with prickly sea grass, would move under her body. No touching, no touching, she would plead inside, letting Zvi stab himself into her. Sometimes the echo of a pleasant whisper would rise up inside her. A tiny tickle moving up her lower belly, the mere shadow of a wish that he would kiss her on the lips again, as he once did back there, before they came here. But Zvi would begin to pound and unexpectedly collapse, and she would panic and say to him hoarsely, enough, Zvi, enough, get out, get out, I can't. For a moment he would lie beside her, shuddering and breathing, and then he would turn his back on her and fall asleep. After she had washed - down there, too, down inside, so that God forbid she would not find herself, during this tough time, facing what-should-happen-only-to-my-enemies - she would hum to herself in the dark, in a whiny whisper, a melody that her father used to sing on Friday nights as he came home from the synagogue, or else mumble pieces of long-forgotten rhymes from school, Goethe and Heine."!

Staggering combination!

! It is hard to describe the precise beauty and supreme sensitivity of this passage, the staggering combination of its elements - the inner cry of the crisp, frozen, starched woman: "no touching, no touching," the mattress stinging her flesh from behind, Zvi stinging it from the front. The longing for the physical contact of lips on lips - the only site, it seems, where both man and woman can be "the sex that is not one," neither inflicting nor receiving the sting, all searching lips, an open palm and fingers. The sense of the filth splattered on her and driven into her flesh, which is translated into the humiliating practice of "purification." And, finally, the sobs seeking a language for themselves in pre-history, where they find Father, the synagogue, Goethe and Heine. In the absence of language, Jenia turns to moans. !

! From this point on, all of the other women in the story are born out of the same intuition. They are ruled, for better or worse, by the profound social instruction that leads them, and us, to idolize the domesticated family life of the ravens and reject the exploitative wildness of the cuckoos. Perhaps there is room to rethink this model of ravens and cuckoos. Perhaps, instead of sanctioning one and condemning the other, we should consider a mixture of some kind, less rigid and differentiating, more spacious and accommodating. Ya'ara began to think about this, but became stuck halfway - with the unanswered questions. And even this is a relief. !

! The communal sleeping arrangements of the kibbutz and their home-based bourgeois alternative are not representations of good and bad in their own right. The trendy complaints about kibbutz sleeping practices are also an expression of anxiety about a different kind of mothering, not sufficiently raven-like. And the bourgeois home, with its family life, is no guarantee of warmth and protection. Shimon's mother is not mentally ill - she is the extreme conclusion of a

particular view of motherhood. She used to have a powerful voice, "making up entire songs while she sang them ... a kind of stories told by a woman." But these were promptly dismissed by her husband and son as "postpartum depression." Nor is Jenia the antithesis of the mythological kibbutz mother: She is her twin sister. All of these women move within a constricted and bounded space, and all become nourishment for perceptions and conceptualizations manufactured in the synagogue and among the idols of patriarchal culture. !

! Avirama Golan has produced feminine writing that deserves a place of honor among women's literature. She has found a path to the Archimedean point of observation. What remains is for us to perform a women's reading, a feminine reading.!

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