

Introduction: The Other Voice

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The Missing Profile: Portrait of Women as Israeli Writers

Israeli women's fiction has not yet reached the scope, variety, and independence of Israeli women's poetry. One reason is the absence of an image of women as story-tellers. That is, though Hebrew poetry encompasses a consolidated, female "poetic I" that is different from the male "poetic I," no image of a woman writer of fiction is available for the female author. The creator in Israeli fiction is almost always a man, just as the fictional protagonist is almost always a man. What force is responsible for this situation, and why have Israel's women authors failed to invent an image of a woman creator that will give expression to their decision to write?

My basic position is that women's literature can be understood as a systems crossroads: a meeting point between the system of literary production and the system of sexual belonging. When these two systems meet, tension arises between the conception of female identity on the one hand and the conception of creativity as a male realm on the other. Women's literature often reflects the individual's attempt to mediate between the commands of feminine identity (which she learns through her every interaction within society) and

the dictates of the masculine literary system.

Women writers of Hebrew fiction did not aim to capture the literary territory of men, nor did they seek to revolutionize the production of literature. Instead, women writers sought only to join with their compatriots in the literary arena, and they emphasized the modesty of their demands. This modesty was forced on women by Jewish culture, claims Amalia Kahana-Carmon.¹ Throughout history, women have been barred from the role of public representative in the synagogue. The private realm is assigned to the Jewish woman, while the Jewish man occupies the public realm. The woman writer internalizes the status demanded by religion, Kahana-Carmon argues, and consequently is unable to picture herself as a figure of central importance in the community. Unlike the male writer who, in the words of Amos Oz, assumes the role of "tribal magician,"² the female writer does not dare demand such a position of authority.

Devorah Baron—The First Birth of Women's Hebrew Fiction

Hebrew literature may be unique among world literature in that its women's fiction was born twice, and more than fifty years separate the two births. The first birth occurred in 1902 with the publication of Devorah Baron's first short stories in literary journals. Though Baron was forced to wait 25 years for the publication of her first book, the collection *Stories*, her earliest pieces had generated enormous excitement, with the literary community welcoming the young writer as if she were a *wunderkind*. Her embrace by the male establishment was indeed wonderful—and within a short time she had been granted a special status within Hebrew letters.

How do we account for this spectacular reception? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, secular Hebrew literature sought to include women. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the founder of modern Hebrew, wrote, "the demand of the moment is that women penetrate Hebrew literature."³ And in 1905 the critic M. M. Feitelson

1. Amalia Kahana-Carmon, "Songs of Bats as They Fly," 1989 (Hebrew).

2. Amos Oz, "In Bright Blue Light," 1979 (Hebrew).

3. Cited by Yaffa Berlovitz, "The Writings of the Daughters of the First Aliyah: Afterword," *Stories by Women: Daughters of the First Aliyah* (Israel: Sifriat Tarmil, 1984) (Hebrew).

wrote an article entitled "The Liberated Woman In Our Literature." Hence, the Hebrew literary establishment took great pride in its first woman writer, who had—in addition to talent—both beauty and a rabbinic lineage.⁴ She was adored as the token female presence.

The young Devorah Baron was an independent personality, and she strove for the freedom that Jewish men were granted. She insisted on an education parallel to men's, and she studied first in *heder* (religious school for younger children) and later in high school. She supported herself by teaching Hebrew, and she worked as a counselor for Zionist youth.

In her early stories Baron dared to protest the neglect of women by Jewish religious law, and she did not shy away from erotic subjects. Though she knew the risks involved, she did not censor her fiction. Her only defenses against malicious gossip were her distant behavior and her exceedingly modest dress. Her nun-like image, however, did not protect her. One particularly suggestive passage in "A Quarreling Couple" led writers and editors to gossip that she was no virgin, and this gossip damaged her relationship with her fiancé, the writer Moshe Ben-Eliezer. But Baron did not let the gossip deter her from writing.

Devorah Baron broke off her engagement in 1910, after five years, and left Russia for the land of Israel. She began working as the literary editor of the newspaper *Hapoel Hatzair*, and in 1911 she married the paper's editor, Yosef Aharonovitch, already a renowned Zionist labor leader. They and their daughter were exiled to Egypt during World War I. Upon returning to Palestine, the couple resumed editing and writing, but Aharonovitch resigned in 1922 to become director of Bank HaPo'alim (The Workers' Bank). Baron also resigned her position with the newspaper. For the next fifty years, no Israeli woman would work in literary editing.

Baron continued writing fiction and translating literary works into Hebrew, but in 1936 suffered an illness which was to keep her bedridden until her death in 1956. She broke off almost every physical contact with the outside world, participated in no public activity, gave

no interviews, and met only a small number of people. She did not even attend the funeral of her husband. Dov Sadan, a contemporary literary critic, wrote that on the day of Aharonovitch's funeral he saw Baron take three steps outside the house, and then return inside.

Baron apparently imprisoned herself in her home willingly, giving up freedom of movement and the enjoyment of physical life, in order to win spiritual freedom and the right to create literature with absolute dedication to her craft. Her reclusive life released her from women's customary roles. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the ground-breaking *The Madwoman in the Attic* argue that illness expresses women's social weakness in a world whose rules are created by men, yet this weakness gives a woman the only power available to her: the power of refusal.⁵ Devorah Baron did indeed refuse with all her strength: she refused to eat regular food and she starved herself; she refused to move freely and she stayed in bed; and she especially refused to meet the world as it was.

Gilbert and Gubar emphasize that self-starvation (anorexia), confinement to the home (agoraphobia), and other predominantly female illnesses, are in fact more than protests or refusals. They are also desperate expressions of the woman's desire to control her life. Though she has only the power to refuse, she has one realm where she remains in control: her body. This results in the paradoxical situation whereby women hurt their bodies to prove their power. The other reason why women damage their bodies is to conquer female physicality. The woman is thus able to attain transcendentalism and to rise to spiritual spheres. Gilbert and Gubar make clear that a woman recoils from the physical because patriarchal society views the female body as tempting, provocative, and monstrous.⁶

Devorah Baron may in fact have recoiled from her body when she took away from it almost every physical enjoyment. Nonetheless,

4. A detailed description of her reception by the literary world is found in Nurit Govrin, "The First Half: Devorah Baron and Her Work 1887-1923" (1988) (Hebrew).

5. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

6. Gilbert and Gubar note the instructive comment by Adrienne Rich that every thinking woman is liable to see herself as captured within her hideous body and to recoil from it.

she made sure to maintain her body at the level required to carry out her spiritual mission. In effect, Baron enslaved her body for one aim—artistic creation. Only by removing herself from mundane existence could Baron create an alternative reality, where she alone would dictate the rules. Baron lived in this closed world mainly with her daughter, Zipporah, and various housemaids. Her world, therefore, was a women's world, and male strictures were outside its boundaries.

Devorah Baron's rules were similar to those of a monastic order: sexual withdrawal, the lack of any bodily enjoyment, dedication to literary/spiritual creation, and the abandonment of selfhood. Nurit Govrin describes the writer as someone who "while still alive became a fairy tale—the tale of the captured princess." Baron, though, was not a tender heroine of romance, and only death rescued her from her self-imposed prison.

The Second Birth of Women's Hebrew Fiction

The second birth of women's Hebrew fiction occurred in 1956 with the publication of Amalia Kahana-Carmon's first short story. Her acceptance as a central Israeli writer, however, alongside the men who were members of her literary generation like Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, took place ten years later with the publication of her first book.

The entrance by Amalia Kahana-Carmon into the literary community took place in an era that differed radically from Devorah Baron's. By mid-century, women poets writing in Hebrew were relatively commonplace, with Rachel, Yokheved Bat-Miriam, and Leah Goldberg among the most renowned, so there was no need for a token representative of womanhood. In addition, Israel was a young country and its existence was in danger, so it valued its masculine foundations—wartime bravery, independence, aggressiveness, self-reliance (all seen as male traits)—and as a corollary devalued women's achievements. Therefore no publishers knocked on Amalia Kahana-Carmon's door in 1956. On the contrary, her unusual works inspired great opposition. A number of editors refused to publish her collection of stories, even though she had won the prestigious Amot prize for "N'ima Sassoon Writes Poems." Only after many rejections

were the pieces accepted for publication. The collection, *Under One Roof*, won outstanding praise from the critics, and in the late sixties Kahana-Carmon assumed her place among the central creators of Israeli fiction.⁷

Yet the mid-century retreat from earlier demands for female equality does not adequately explain why so few women between the turn of the century and the late fifties published Hebrew fiction. If Jewish women of 1900 had really been granted the historic opportunity to join with Jewish men in the Hebrew literary re-awakening, why were almost no women fiction writers published except for Devorah Baron? If at the first birth of Hebrew women's fiction the only voices were those of supporters and admirers, why was a second birth necessary?

The answer to these questions is complicated. The Jewish literary establishment of the early twentieth century indeed wanted to accept women, but the openness was toward the writer herself rather than toward her work. In other words, beautiful slogans of equal opportunity misled Jewish women writers, who believed that their stories would find wide acceptance, but who found the reality to be entirely different. The Hebrew literary establishment was no more open to the feminine voice than was the English, French, Russian, or any other literary establishment. Male rejection was hidden behind a facade of admiration for women.

In the case of Devorah Baron, the early twentieth-century male literary world relished the existence of a female writer in its midst, but male editors directed her stories to a separate and marginal place within the publishing hierarchy, and male writers never perceived her as a worthy competitor.⁸ Her contemporaries' fascination with the writer as a woman did not result in a corresponding fascination with

7. The critical reaction is surveyed in my book, *Amalia Kahana-Carmon: Monograph*, 1986 (Hebrew). In the winter of 1994, Kahana-Carmon was awarded the Bialik Prize, Israel's most prestigious award.

8. As mainstream Hebrew fiction writers turned increasingly to stories of Israel, Devorah Baron continued to explore the diaspora life she had known as a child. Unlike most men writing during the first half of the century, she avoids surrealistic effects, interior monologue, and overt symbolism. Furthermore, she eschews the collective historical perspective of Zionist-socialism which many Hebrew literary critics of her day considered indispensable for serious fiction.