



Yod

Revue des études hébraïques et juives

20 | 2015

Zeruya Shalev – récits de femmes

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Electronic version

URL: <http://yod.revues.org/2286>

DOI: 10.4000/yod.2286

ISSN: 2261-0200

Publisher

INALCO

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 janvier 2015

ISBN: 978-2-85831-226-9

ISSN: 0338-9316

Electronic reference

Tamar Setter, « Is There Place for a New Watchwoman for the House of Israel? », *Yod* [Online], 20 | 2015, Online since 29 February 2016, connection on 01 October 2016. URL : <http://yod.revues.org/2286> ; DOI : 10.4000/yod.2286

The text is a facsimile of the print edition.



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Is There Place for a New Watchwoman for the House of Israel?

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Since the literature of the *Haskalah*, the position of the Hebrew writer has been that of "a watchman for the house of Israel", *i.e.*, one who stands on the summit of a mountain and looks over the doings of his people, establishing a moral position vis-à-vis them. This position has not lost its strength in current-day Israeli literature, as is most evident in the popular and critical success of writers such as David Grossman, Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, whose works link the personal with the national, so that the private-familial story reflects the different social, political and economic processes undergone by the Israeli society.

In contrast to these authors, Zeruya Shalev's works do not position the personal against the national. What occurs in the plot does not become a symbol to the national situation, as is the case in A. B. Yehoshua's works, for example, where the cut-off tongue of the Arab in "Facing the Forests" (1968) serves as an analogy to the Palestinian condition in the Israeli society. This is so even though Shalev's works are grounded in the contemporary Israeli experience and are rich with Jewish myths. Even so, they succeed in telling the fall of the heroine's personal house without necessarily linking it to the fall of the national house.

In addition, Shalev's heroines mock the feminist-bourgeois-western codes by challenging the possibility of the very existence of a successful and fulfilled woman in the sexual, occupational and familial spheres. This challenge is expressed first and foremost in the sense of compulsion which forces her heroines to swerve from their supposedly normative life-course, and take an unlimited time-out from the daily race, an action brought on by their distress. One of them even describes her existential state in a simplest form: she wants to go back to being a cared-for baby.

The transition of Shalev's heroines into a consciousness-island of their own, one that has loose ties to reality, and in which they devote themselves to examining their emotions, such as their wish for the love of a man or a child, and to exploring the histories of their families, does not allow their author to step into the dignified, leading and responsible shoes of those who write out of a wish to lead nationally and morally. In contrast to them, Shalev puts her heroines' emotional world in the center without balancing it with social questions.

We must pay attention to the fact that Shalev's auto-exclusion from the respectable pantheon of the "watchman for the house of Israel" authors does not fall into the worn-out stereotype of women's writing, since her work challenges the masculine concept that stands behind this concept (at its base or in its background) through her examination of the sexual, social and familial presuppositions that enable its existence. The challenging of the masculine entity in her novels eventually leads to the challenging of the masculine authority associated with the figure of the "watchman for the house of Israel".

In order to prove this thesis I will focus in this article on her novel *Love Life*. The novel presents the mental deterioration of its heroine, Yaara Kurman, through her sexual and mental enslavement to a man, Aryeh Even, who is later revealed as the former lover of her mother. Even though Yaara is on a direct track for a university teaching assistant appointment, a respectable and highly regarded profession for a young woman in Israel's society, she prefers to neglect the writing of her M.A. thesis. This theme repeats itself in the novel *The Remains of Love* where the heroine, Dina, chooses adopting a child instead of writing a dissertation. In this way, the two heroines destroy their academic careers with their own two hands, and question one of the founding assumptions of liberal feminism, which claims that women can and want to reach self-fulfillment through their careers.

Even at the end of the novel, when Yaara returns to the library and holds a book on the subject of her thesis, legends of the destruction of the Temple, she is not doing so because she has returned to the "main track", but because she believes the mythic stories of the fall will allow her a better understanding of the fall of her own family, the only subject that engages her and charges her life with meaning.

In addition to Yaara's refrain from nurturing her academic career, she foregoes an attempt to mend her relationship with her husband, Yoni, who encourages her to advance in her career and initiates their common trip to Istanbul. In this light, one must examine the confusing and intriguing feminine position presented in the novel – Yaara's position and the author's position – through asking the following questions: Why does Yaara choose to crush everything she has achieved in favor of spending time with a man who could not reciprocate her feelings? Moreover, is she doing this only in order to go on a sexual quest that will lead her to experience the sexual fulfillment she cannot experience with her current husband?

Many questions rise also in relation to the author's non-nationalist position: Why does it lead to a masochistic and destructive behavior of the heroine? In addition, can we see Yaara's behavior as masochistic at all, or does the novel challenge the binary concepts, which position masochism as a reversed option to sadism? During the reading of the novel, some of the characters experience the qualities that are considered inverse, as several characters are revealed as feminine as well as masculine, as superior as well as inferior.

Yaara's character, for example, is both strong and weak in relation to Aryeh. Her weakness is stated in the following segment:

And I thought how comfortable it would be for me to live with him since I'll always know he doesn't love me and I won't have to suffer this tension all the time, that he would stop loving me all of a sudden. And I felt I had an enormous advantage over all the women in the world because he really doesn't love me.¹

Her relishing the thought that the man with whom she is in a relationship will never love her reveals her double weakness: not only does he not love her, but instead of feeling hurt by this, she feels it actually gives her an advantage over all other women.

It is also revealed that Aryeh is as much in need of a relationship with her as she needs him. After Yaara leaves his home during the *shiv'ah* he returns to her and asks her company. In addition, his deep disappointment in his life sentences him to walk around with a sense of insult and loss, which does not allow him to have intimate relations with other human beings. Shai Tzur describes Aryeh as a frozen stone, a half-dying man, someone who undergoes a process of rotting.²

1. Zeruya SHALEV, 1997, *Love Life*, p. 103, my translation.

2. Shai TZUR, 2011, *The Fall of the Private Home in Contemporary Israeli Literature*, p. 221.

Meanwhile, Yaara is attempting to resist, even if unsuccessfully, the dynasty of loss and despair she inherits from her parents, through exploring their pasts and tying her life to the life of the man who had brought on their ruin. Therefore, her personality possesses a will to change the despairing life-course forced on her by her parents, while Aryeh is revealed as someone to whom no one could offer any sort of solace.

In his essay “The Beauty who Chose to Continue Sleeping” Yigal Schwartz shows that Yoni, Yaara’s husband, is a character who extinguishes her sexual and emotional desire, one who cannot contain her fire, and cools her enthusiasm for life in general.³ Out of this, I propose to see Yaara’s choice to be sexually enslaved to Aryeh as an attempt to reexamine the gender-power-relations through someone who does not extinguish her fire, as we see in the following dialogue between them:

You are dying to be screwed like a cat, and again I growled yes, the truth is I haven’t really thought about it, but actually what exactly did we convene here for, and pretty fast I found myself on all fours, with him stuck inside me, and between myself I wondered whether it was a hassle or a pleasure. I felt him forcefully pull my hair, as if calling my head into order, and then I started really getting into the mood.⁴

The question whether Yaara is hassled or pleased will repeat itself throughout the novel and remain without an unequivocal answer. The novel raises the possibility that the distance between hassle and pleasure is not as far as we have become accustomed to think, and from the tension that stands between these two sensory options, Yaara seeks out the relationship with Aryeh.

Furthermore, their relationship is dynamic and there are repeated role-switches between the ruler and the ruled, the sick and the healing, and between the sleeping and the awake. These switches arouse Yaara. Therefore, I propose to see her character as not only passive because she chooses to enter a relationship with someone who injects strong emotions into her being.

It may be understood from the last paragraph that Aryeh is the “knight on the white horse” who frees Yaara from her boring life, but this is not what I’m trying to argue. The most interesting thing I found about this novel is that it does not fall into pornographic clichés since it describes the feminine-sexual and

3. Yigal SCHWARTZ, 2000, “The Beauty who Chose to Continue Sleeping”, p. 99.

4. Zeruya SHALEV, 1997, *Love Life*, p. 238, my translation.

the masculine-sexual entanglement from a creative, radical and original female perspective. We can see it in the way that it describes Aryeh's character: the most interesting aspect about him is the movement between two gender-poles. At times, he is presented as the most macho of men: he is mysterious and rules every situation, whether at the house of Yaara's parents or at a clothes shop where he is with a young and attractive woman. He is confident and works a great deal of magic over his listeners.

This is what makes his many feminine and childish performances throughout the novel so shocking. In the hospital, for example, Yaara enters the toilet stall with him, and she describes the unbearable stench of his urine, and the sliding of a drop onto his pants and their staining. In another meeting between them, she thinks to herself: "the more his dick grows, the more his woman shrinks". This sentence can be understood in two ways: the first one is that the woman he is having sex with is shrinking during the sexual act. The second one is that the woman who exists inside of him disappears when his organ erects. The second meaning refers to the feminine aspects in his character, which lies beside his masculine aspects, a theme that will repeat itself during the novel. The double meaning of the sentence manifests the complexness, which presents a conflicted reality of life: the one who appeared at first to be an unobtainable macho man is revealed as a ridiculed character because of its stench. In other times, the same macho man is revealed as having feminine sides.

The transgender option, which accompanies the novel and dismantles the feminine and masculine subject of their accepted and usual content, is supplemented by a fluctuation of identities between the different characters, as Schwartz has already pointed out in his essay.⁵ For what concerns us, I will supply the following example for the blurring of identities, which occurs when Yaara arrives at her parents' house after visiting Aryeh's dying wife at the hospital, and asks her mother: "What did you have with him?" Even before her mother answers, Yaara tells that "he" emerged from behind her mother's back, as the readers assume she is referring to Aryeh. Only later, it turns out that the one who emerged from behind her mother's back was not Aryeh but her father.

This dialogue gives us another hint to the fact that the relationship with Aryeh serves as a compensation for Yaara's lost relationship with her estranged father and mother. Yaara's sexual and emotional object of desire is revealed to be her parents no less than Aryeh. The heroine even attests herself on the entangled web of identities in which she is situated:

5. Yigal SCHWARTZ, 2000, "The Beauty who Chose to Continue Sleeping", p. 101.

All those indirect lines which lead from one person to the next, to know Aryeh through his wife, father through Aryeh, Yoni through father, a sort of endless “Had Gadya” which grows more and more complicated.⁶

The novel does not only question the possibility of a solid female or male essence, but also questions the possibility of being a unified subject, which stands on its own, and is not intermixed with other subjects. In this way, the possibility of being “the watchman for the house of Israel” who looks on his people from a high and distant place dissipates more and more as the novel progresses. The option, which arises in its place, is looking at a single house in Israel, which cannot and does not want to tell the national story.

I see this stand as subversive and conservative at once: conservative – since it re-establishes women’s literature in the personal sphere, which is still considered inferior to the national sphere. Subversive – because of Shalev’s objection to a tradition that had become so rooted in the Israeli literature, and commonplace for central women writers as well, such as Yehudit Katzir, Ronit Matalon and Leah Aini in *The Rose of Lebanon*, who tell the national story through a personal one. Tamar Marin expresses this consensual paradigm in her review of *Thera*, where she called for Shalev to lift her gaze and look at what is seen from outside the window. She suggests it because she wants Shalev to describe the things that are not connected to the single family drama, in order to balance out the intensity of the emotions experienced by her heroines inside the borders of the house⁷.

I propose to see the monologue, which Yaara delivers when she looks at the “normal” people who have come to the *shiv’ah* over Aryeh’s wife as a kind of an answer to Marin’s call for the writer’s national awakening.

But love life is only a part of life, and not the most important part of it, it is only a small pocket in the suit of life, and that everyone sitting there knows. That’s why they sit there drinking coffee and eating cakes and you lie here in the dark locked up like an inmate in prison, like a patient in a madhouse.⁸

6. Zeruya SHALEV, 1997, *Love Life*, p. 125, my translation.

7. Tamar MARIN, 2005, “Looking, Even for a Moment, at the Perceived Drama Outside the Window”, p. 4.

8. Zeruya SHALEV, 1997, *Love Life*, p. 198, my translation.

“The watchman for the house of Israel” has transformed into the madhouse patient in Shalev’s novels, the one who does not obey the literary and social boundaries which are common in the Israeli literature. The heroine and the author do not accept upon themselves the moral set of assumptions that claim that the individual can and should be balanced by society. Instead, the author gives herself fully to describing the turning of the gender and family structures into “the Unheimlich,” until the concept of “the watchman for the house of Israel” becomes uncanny.

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Abstract: In this article, I will discuss the special role that Zeruya Shalev has in the contemporary Israeli literature by the interpretation of the novel *Love Life* (1997). I shall claim that Shalev, as opposed to canonical Israeli writers such as Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua and David Grossman, does not establish herself as the “watchman for the house of Israel”. Thus, she tells the private-domestic-feminine narrative in a way that does not reflect the Israeli national narrative.

Keywords: Shalev Zeruya (1959-), Oz Amos (1939-), Grossman David (1954-), Yehoshua Abraham B. (1936-), political writer, national narrative, women’s writing, literature

Résumé : L’objectif de cet article est d’étudier la place unique de Zeruya Shalev dans la narration israélienne à travers le roman Vie amoureuse paru en 1997. À la différence d’auteurs tels Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua et David Grossman qui font dans leurs œuvres le lien entre le personnel et le national, Shalev ne se considère pas comme « une sentinelle pour la maison d’Israël » et fait un récit personnel et féminin de façon complètement indépendante.

Mots-clés : Shalev Zeruya (1959-), Oz Amos (1939-), Grossman David (1954-), Yehoshua Abraham B. (1936-), écrivain politique, récit national, écriture féminine, littérature

תקציר: במאמר זה אבחן את מקומה הייחודי של צרויה שלו בספרות הישראלית דרך ניתוח הרומן "חיי אהבה" שראה אור ב-1997. אראה כיצד שלו, בניגוד לסופרים קאנוניים בספרות הישראלית כעמוס עוז, א"ב יהושע ודויד גרוסמן, המחברים ביצירותיהם בין האישי ללאומי, אינה מציבה את עצמה כ"צופה לבית ישראל" בשל סיפורה את הנרטיב הפרטי-הדומסטי-הנשי באופן שאינו משקף את הנרטיב הישראלי-הלאומי.

מילות מפתח: צרויה שלו, סופר פוליטי, נרטיב לאומי, כתיבה נשית, עמוס עוז, דויד "גרוסמן, א"ב יהושע, הצופה לבית ישראל, "חיי אהבה", "שארית החיים