

Book Review

Baron, Dvora. *The First Day and Other Stories*. Translated by Naomi Seidman with Chana Kronfeld. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

It is a bit disconcerting that Dvora Baron, the first Hebrew woman author who immigrated to Israel in 1910 as a pioneer chose to shun the subject of nation building in her fictional oeuvre. Was her avoidance of this subject an implicit rejection of the male dominated enterprise she was only partially involved in as the co-editor with her husband of a major journal? Was the mysterious illness that kept her bed-ridden for over thirty years until her death in 1956 a somatic expression of her alienation — as a woman author — from the energetic process unfolding around her? A recent imaginary reconstruction of Baron's life, written by Amia Lieblich and translated by Naomi Seidman, entitled *Conversations with Dvora* (University of California Press, 1998), suggests possible explanations, without opting for any final conclusions regarding the secluded life of Dvora Baron. Ostensibly, the author's sensitive description of the vulnerable heroes of the East European Shtetl affirms the Zionist doctrine of the Negation of the Diaspora (shlilat hagola). On the other hand, we could argue that the description of Jewish women's stunted lives is a vicarious representation of Baron's own sense of alienation and vulnerability. Lieblich suggests that Baron wrote in detail about stultifying marriages in order to cheer up her daughter, Tzipporah, who suffered from epilepsy and was doomed to a celibate life.

Be it as it may, Baron's compassion for the female victims of Jewish traditionalism is unmistakable. In the short story "Bill of Divorcement," she presents the fate of the divorcee as a slow process of social dying. A previous translator, Felice Kahn Ziskend, entitled the story "Excision" in order to drive home the social critique it implies. (See "Excision" translated by Felice Kahn Ziskend in Lily Rattok and Anita Diamant, ed. *Ribcage: Israeli Women's Fiction*, 1994). The original title "Kritut" can be translated as both, though "excision" does make explicit what "Bill of Divorcement" does not. Indeed the word "mekupahot" in the first paragraph is literally "discriminated against" as Ziskend translates the word, while Seidman has opted for "afflicted." The word "hitkaphu" is repeated again in conjunction with "workers." Seidman translates this word as "exploited" as does Ziskend. On the whole, Seidman's translation focuses on creating a readable and engrossing text, at times, at the expense of literal accuracy. The allusiveness and multiple meanings of Baron's diction could have been conveyed through footnotes, an option that Seidman decided against, so as not to produce an overly academic book.

In Seidman's translation, the first paragraph of this story reads as follows: "Of all the people who came before my father's rabbinic court, the women who were about to be sent away from their husbands' homes seemed to me the most afflicted. Certainly there were others who had been robbed of justice: workers whose bosses had exploited them or peddlers who had been cheated, but those people stood some chance of seeing their situations rectified" (*The First Day*, p. 48). Baron's point is that the women "who were about to be sent away" were sent away

against their will, and through no fault of their own. The divorcees in both episodes that make up this short story are women who loved their husbands, who fulfilled their spousal commitments, women who did not deserve to be “sent away.” The first woman is sent away simply because her husband’s family resented her, and because her husband sought a younger wife. The second story details the plight of barren women, sent away after ten years of marriage, having failed to fulfill their procreative duties. Baron’s detailed description of these women’s fate indicts both the discriminatory and oppressive implications of the Halakhic attitude to women and the outrageous lack of communal resources that may have alleviated the extreme isolation and economic hardships that usually befell divorcees in the Jewish *shtetl*.

The trials and tribulations of the childless woman are described as well in “Family.” Dinah, the hero of the story, recognizes that she is replaceable, and no amount of crying seems able to respond to her plight. In Seidman’s translation: “There is a measure of sorrow the poets call a ‘cask of tears.’ It is an open vessel that collects the essence of pain, drop by drop, filling as a person’s sorrow grows... As she planted the vegetable seeds in the garden that spring she cried, and when she went out later to weed, she cried again – with every stalk she pulled up. It may be that she was comparing them to herself, who would also soon be uprooted from her spot to make room for others. (*The First Day*,” p. 84). Yet, much as the divorcee’s life is filled with endless sorrow and pain, the fate of the widow in the *shtetl* is not much better. The eponymous hero of “Shifra” is the victim of a ruthless class system that offers little to women who have lost their economic source of support, their husbands. Shifra, a young mother of two, is hired as a wet nurse by a wealthy gentile family, and soon loses her meager source of income because of her inability to control her tears and sense of humiliation. Like Dinah, Shifra sobs and cries, but to no avail. Both the divorcee and the widow are doomed to a life of economic strife and social abandonment.

But the bitter fate of women who lose their husbands is visited as well on married women. “Fradl” is the story of a married woman who is trapped in a loveless marriage. Much like Baron’s other unfortunate protagonists who depend on their husbands for emotional fulfillment, Fradl does all she can to sustain her husband’s affection and interest. Even when he begins to leave on long trips, leaving her behind for weeks and months at a time, she cherishes his letters, and keeps hoping that her marriage will persevere. Reluctantly, Fradl realizes that her husband, who has abandoned her emotionally, and physically, is no longer worthy of pursuing. For the most part, however, Baron’s heroes live out their lives misguided and neglected in the margins of Jewish society, dependent on the mercy of other women who may or may not share their own meager resources with them.

Baron’s presentation of Jewish women as vulnerable and disenfranchised anticipates the insights of the feminist consciousness that dawned in Hebrew literature in the early 1980s. Baron’s evocation of the exilic past of Jewish women offers a historical dimension, a thematic continuity to the problems analyzed by contemporary Israeli feminists in a seemingly radically different context. Seidman’s introduction points up Baron’s importance as a chronicler of Jewish women’s lives, though I wish she offered additional information about her selections, notably stories

translated from Yiddish. Though, Seidman notes Baron's significance as a modernist writer, more background information about her specific use of modernism, her style of writing, specific narrative techniques and the challenges she presents to an English translator, as well as information about previous translations would have been appropriate.

Esther Fuchs
University of Arizona, Tucson