

Yael S. Feldman. *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation in Israeli Women's Fiction*. Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1999  
*Lelo heder mishelachen: Migdar uleumiut biyetziratan shel sofrot israeliyot*. Hakibbutz hameuchad, Tel Aviv, 2002  
Winner of the 2003 Abraham Friedman Award for Hebrew Literature

Reviewed by Amia Lieblich, Professor, The Hebrew University

Graced by a portrait of Virginia Woolf on its cover, Yael Feldman's book is an original attempt to construct a bridge between Woolf's legacy – and, secondarily, that of Simone de Beauvoir – and the literary creations of several contemporary Israeli women novelists. Feldman accomplishes this challenging goal by presenting three interwoven topics: the elaboration of a literary–feminist thesis on gender and society, originating in the works of Woolf and de Beauvoir and further developed by scholars in the U.S. and Europe; a historical review of feminism in Israel and its unique sociocultural character; and, principally, a literary analysis of the work of five novelists – Ruth Almog, Netiva Ben Yehuda, Shulamit Hareven, Amalia Kahana-Carmon, and Shulamit Lapid – focussing on the themes of gender and sex, androgyny, motherhood, self-actualization and self-fulfillment in the lives of women. While each one of these topics is a fascinating project on its own right, the amalgamation of the three produces a brilliant cultural–historical study. The fact that Feldman, an Israeli scholar, resides in the United States would seem to provide her with the proper distance from which to view Hebrew-Israeli works and processes in their broadest, most meaningful context.

Examining these five novelists from the larger perspective of European and American feminisms, Feldman concludes that the local Israeli version, though it emerged somewhat belatedly and is colored by specific national circumstances, is no less troubled and complex and no less tormented by issues of gender essentialism and differences. The works of these five authors, as well as many others who are mentioned in passing, represent feminine Israeli voices grappling with the Zionist notion of the “New Hebrew Woman” in all its manifestations and contradictions. Thus, they are embedded both in gender conceptions and in nationalist ideologies, and they are

entangled in the struggles of individual women for expression and equality, on the one hand, and in the shadow of the Holocaust, the siege mentality of the state, and the constant threat of war in the Middle East, on the other. All of these create fertile ground for the growth of a multitude of representations.

The international theoretical context to these analyses is furnished by the literature of the past half-century on the Woman Question. As Feldman puts it:

What may have seemed in the first half of the century a relatively simple issue of social and psychological emancipation to be achieved by educational and economic equal opportunity (represented by a surface reading of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, 1929), seems hopelessly entangled today with philosophical challenges to a long, even ancient tradition, that of woman's alterity (as documented in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, 1949). (p. 12)

It is beyond the scope of this review to present the intricate literary analyses which follow these lines and include many other ingredients, from Freudian psychoanalysis to Hebrew linguistics and biblical scholarship. I will demonstrate some of the insights I derived from this book by referring to the chapter about Netiva Ben Yehuda. Though Ben Yehuda's entrance into the Israeli literary scene is relatively recent, the topic of her Palmach trilogy, which appeared between 1981 and 1991, is the 1948 War of Independence. Written in very blunt, often humorous Hebrew, her books demystify the war and in particular the activities of men – and women – in the battlefield. Until the publication of these three books, the participation of women, who comprised half the Palmach's fighters, had left hardly any mark on the literary legacy of Ben Yehuda's generation. Her work depicts the Palmach's cruel betrayal of its promise of sexual equality. According to Feldman's interpretation, it is the pain of this old wound that prevented the author from giving voice to her experience for three decades. Only by the late 1970s, when feminism began to emerge in Israeli society, was Ben Yehuda – brave as she has always been – able to break her silence about her personal trauma of war among men. And yet, Ben Yehuda has vehemently refused to be called a feminist, then or now. She declares: "We were not suffragettes. I said this a thousand

times and I will say this another thousand times” (p. 184).

Feldman’s ability to go back and forth between these Israeli novels and the work of Woolf (and sometimes de Beauvoir) is astonishing. For example, Feldman analyzes Ben Yehuda’s use of Hebrew word-plays to deconstruct the myths of her generation while simultaneously subjecting her books to an examination from the perspective of the issues of androgynous identity and militarism raised by Woolf in *Orlando* and *Three Guineas*.

The question of the transfer of ideas between cultures and generations is of course an old and very difficult one. No scholar can ascertain that the Hebrew novelists under discussion read, internalized and were influenced directly by the works of Woolf, de Beauvoir and others. And yet, Feldman’s analysis would seem to reveal identical concerns, or at least similar themes. What sort of direct or indirect communication existed between these two ‘systems’? Could all these parallel notions – Woolf’s and Ben Yehuda’s, for example – stem from the similar private experiences of women and men anywhere, notwithstanding exposure to certain works of art or literature at certain times? While no definite answer can be given to this question, the result of Feldman’s quest is a fascinating study, full of surprises and insights for scholars of Israeli culture and literature and for feminists everywhere.

First published in *Nashim* 4 (Fall 2001). Reprinted with permission from the author and *Nashim*’s managing editor.