



Deganit Berest, "The Circle by Virginia" (1975), 24" x 20",
black and white photo and chinograph.

No Room of Their Own

Gender and Nation in Israeli Women's Fiction

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*To the beloved memory of my mother
whose untold story
shines through the pages of this book*

the heroine, on the other).⁵⁸ Whatever the case, it is clear that the feminist romance produced here is an essentialist mirror image of its masculinist counterpart. While the sociocultural antagonism it may encounter is given cursory attention, any possible complication by psychosexual difference is blissfully ignored.⁵⁹

The same goes for some of Lapid's later short stories in which romance is replaced by aggression. A straightforward reversal of roles in a violent rape scene, for example, is the subject of "Neḥitat 'oness" (Forced Landing; published in English as "The Bed" but better rendered as "Forced Entry").⁶⁰ The painful experience of what I would call "counter-rape" is focalized through the eyes of the victim—a young *man*, whose bewildered incomprehension is utterly ignored by his female attacker. Gender difference is again turned upside down: here the female grotesquely "redeems" her alterity by donning the dark face of masculine subjectivity, aggression.⁶¹

More sophisticated dramatizations of these issues are to come in the following chapters. But in order to do justice to their rich fictional webs I need to pick up the thread of theoretical narrative. The question I expect it to answer is, to put it crudely, How are we to cut—if at all possible—the Gordian knot of gender essentialism, of difference and otherness? In pursuit of this inquiry, I will first turn to the mother of "woman's alterity," Simone de Beauvoir, and her contemporary daughters. In view of Beauvoir's significant presence in Israeli culture since the 1950s (see the introduction), her special blend of existentialist feminism should offer some valuable insights into the work of authors who began writing in the 1960s. In a brief visit to the origins of gender theory—as well as to its contemporary offshoots—I therefore outline the "solutions" offered by both while highlighting those that are particularly relevant to the Israeli authors explored in this study.



Alterity Revisited: Gender Theory and Israeli Literary Feminism

Half the people in the world
love the other half
half the people
hate the other half . . .
Half the people love,
half hate.

And where is my place between the two tightly fitting halves . . .

—Yehuda Amichai

It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs.

—Thomas Hardy

1. *Beauvoir's Drama of Subjectivity*

Woman's primordial otherness—as represented in ancient myth and ritual as well as in interpretations of them by twentieth-century (mostly male) scholars—is one of the deep structures we encountered in our mythological reading of *Gei Oni*. These are the very myths that Simone de Beauvoir set out to expose in her pioneering study, *The Second Sex*. One of the major points made by Beauvoir in her work is that the single common denominator of different myths and other narratives about woman's alterity (as indeed of alterity in general!) is that of *ambivalence*. Whether filtered through Freud's individual psychology or Erich Neumann's "archetypology" (*The Great Mother*) or through Simone de Beauvoir's own exposition of myths about the second sex, the ambivalence of alterity is a constant: woman is other as both virgin and harlot (Freud), as the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother (Neumann), as the giver of both life and death (186), as bountiful Nature incarnate and as the menacing embodiment of untamed Nature (223).¹ In Beauvoir's succinct summary, woman, "the fearsome other" (191), "is all that man desires and all that he does not attain" (223).

It is this position of duality or ambivalence that makes the other (in general) a *necessary* foil in the constitution of subjectivity. "The subject can be posed only in being opposed," says Beauvoir, openly reflecting (pun intended) Hegel's speculations on the agonistic formation of self-consciousness (xx): "He sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object." (To anticipate later formulations [mutatis mutandis], "The subject comes to be(ing) in the field of the Other.")²

Yet, generally speaking, the subject, whether collective or personal, is not alone in the world: "But the other consciousness, the other ego, sets up a reciprocal claim," says Beauvoir, continuing her Hegelian narrative. If there is any potential here for a psychological interpretation (that is, an understanding of this confrontation as internal, as taking place in some mental space), Beauvoir is unaware (or perhaps unwilling?) to acknowledge it, highlighting instead its external, "foreign relations" function. Encounters between cultures, tribes, classes, and private individuals "deprive the concept *Other* of its absolute sense" and make manifest its relativity and reciprocity, thereby opening the path to a mutual, intersubjective recognition (xx).

Couched here in the language of philosophical abstraction is the tension between self-centeredness and reciprocal reflection that is more familiar to us in the garb of the mirror metaphor. This age-old classical image (magnificently traced and critiqued in Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes*) has always had a double function, representing both narcissism (Greek myth, revived by Freud) and mutual specularity (Aristotle). Attended by its obligatory gaze, or look, that second meaning was resurrected by Lacan in 1936 (*le stade du miroir*) and newly reinterpreted by Sartre in 1943 (*L'Être et le néant*). The latter is of particular significance for us because it dramatizes by way of metaphor the Hegelian point that Beauvoir is making here: that the looked-upon, objectified other has the ontological ability to return the gaze, to say No to the objectifying look, thereby gaining his (or her?) own subjectivity.³ Curiously, none of this Sartrean drama is even hinted at here. Staying close to Hegel's philosophical discourse, Beauvoir shies away from its metaphorical descendants, especially those coined by Sartre. She does cite Lacan's gaze briefly in the discussion of the nursling's mirror stage ("It is especially when he is fixed by the gaze of other persons that he appears to himself as being one," 303), unaware, however, of the potential danger to her Hegelian (should we say Cartesian?) Subject harbored by this gaze. Neither is she aware, apparently, of the gender trou-

ble concealed behind her innocent formulation, "other persons." Using ungendered terms (nursling, infant, child—and parents), Beauvoir weaves a seamlessly neuter narrative in a balancing act between subjectivity and otherness, separation and attachment. The grammatical subject of this narrative is—naturally enough—the ostensibly all-inclusive humanist "he." And although Sartre's existentialism lurks behind her formulation of the "autonomous subject, in transcendence toward the outer world" (ibid), the Sartrean warfare, his "duel of looks," is never mentioned. Was Beauvoir returning the look of her lifelong companion, whose magnum opus preceded hers by a few years?

We will never know for sure, except for the clues she has left in her conceptualization of the particular case of Woman's alterity. As she keenly reminds us, "[this] reciprocity has not been recognized between the sexes. . . . One of the contrasting terms is set up as the sole essential, denying any relativity in regard to its correlative and defining the latter as *pure otherness*" (xxi; emphasis added). Significantly, this anomaly is further sharpened by comparing women's otherness to that of (who else?) "American Negroes" and the Jews. On one hand, women are not a numerical minority like these two groups; on the other, they lack even the "memory of former days," before disrecognition (or oppression) had set in, to which the two other groups have recourse (ibid). It is the memory of this past (a foundational myth or collective memory, we would say today) that makes a change possible, "as the Negroes of Haiti and others have proved." Interestingly, the proof of the "Jews of Palestine" had not reached her yet in 1949 (!), although she made up for it in later years, as documented in the introduction to this volume. Her next observation, however, has a familiar ring: "Regarding themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeois, the whites into 'others'" (xxii).

Several points of this argument deserve our attention: first and foremost, the classification of women's alterity in the same category as racial/religious marginalization (women = blacks = Jews; cf. xxvii). From the perspective of Jewish feminism, this is an important early (perhaps the first) act of inclusion, one that does not ignore or exclude the Jewish problem from a general discussion of marginalization. Sadly, such exclusion does reinscribe itself into later studies of Beauvoir. In her recent study (1994), in a chapter entitled "Narratives of Liberation" (204–213), Toril Moi pays special attention to Beauvoir's treatment of the "negro question" (*négritude*), placing it within the context of Sartre's and Frantz Fanon's writings on this issue. The Jewish question seems to have dropped

from the equation. It is precisely this equation, however, that was picked up by Israeli arch-feminist Amalia Kahana-Carmon, who inventively used it in constructing her own "narrative of liberation" (1984), analyzed in detail in chapter 3.

Other issues worth highlighting are the importance of a past (or at least a memory of one) for restoring balance, and, finally, the unquestioned premise that by assuming subjectivity one automatically transforms the other party into an other . . . a rather pessimistic perception of the human subject that will concern us later.

In any case, women have not had this option or the problem it arouses; having never shared the world in equality with the "first" sex, they are likened to the slave in the notorious master-slave paradigm, that cornerstone of human relations according to Hegelian (and Marxist) theories (xxiii). It is this primordial otherness that needs to be repaired if women are to reinvent themselves as authentic autonomous subjects. Daunting as it may sound, this is not a (theoretically) impossible task if we remember that the slave of this paradigm is presumed to progressively gain more access to the means of production and thereby to freedom. Yet Beauvoir's prognosis for women's liberation is guarded, given the "deep-seated tendencies towards complicity," later called "alienation," that she detects in her peers. As we shall see, this paradigmatic divergence between the progress of the slave in the Hegelian narrative and Beauvoir's own pessimistic rereading of it for woman constitutes the core of the Israeli liberation narrative that is unraveled in chapter 3. In that story Kahana-Carmon juxtaposes three categories of otherness, woman, black, Jew, in their attempt to regain subjectivity. Although she does use the Hegelian gaze metaphor with impunity, the woman of her script succumbs precisely to what Beauvoir called her "tendency to complicity." Yet this is only a temporary lapse, for the final moment of triumph is imagined by Kahana-Carmon in a typical existential formula: the ability to say no to one's oppressor . . . (a verbal image revisited in chapter 6).

Needless to say, from the vantage point of the 1990s not all of Beauvoir's answers and explanations seem satisfactory. While charged by some with "essentialism" (namely, her acceptance of biology as a determinant factor of sexual difference, and her concomitant rejection of motherhood as "the crown of a woman's life" [582ff]), others have championed her as the first theorist of gender *avant la lettre*⁴—a title that really belongs (as I argue in chapter 4) to Virginia Woolf. On the other hand, she was criticized for holding up a so-called masculine ideal—existential transcen-

dence—as the goal of woman's liberation. "Being like a man" is not politically correct anymore, nor is the insistence on the power of willed, rational intelligence to overcome acquired *unconscious* (namely, psychoanalytic) behavioral patterns (Beauvoir, 50ff). So if I have quoted *The Second Sex* somewhat generously, it is not for the strength of the solutions it offers as much as for the power of its exposition and its diagnostic relevance. Indeed, it is commonly agreed that the various feminisms that have developed in the West in the past decades have all responded, in their different ways, to Beauvoir's challenge. Moreover, her "presence" in Israeli culture (see the introduction) makes her ideas a crucial tool for the interpretation of a central chapter in Israeli literary feminism.

I would further suggest, however, that by grouping together "the eternal feminine," "the black soul," and "the Jewish character" as three categories of oppressed alterity (xxvii) Beauvoir anticipated the recent explosion of multicultural and postcolonial studies, in which minority discourse has been redefined, following Foucault, to include any cultural challenges to the dominant canon, thereby "erasing" the numerical meaning of the concepts minority (or other).⁵ This nexus is also present in other contemporary paths of inquiry, all tangentially relevant to our topic: the historical confluence of racism and misogyny (as in Sander Gilman's work on gender in antisemitism and its impact on Freud's theories),⁶ the sociological and theological genderism within Judaism (as in the work of Jewish feminists, mostly American),⁷ and, finally, the symbolization and artistic sublimation of these issues by Jewish creative writers.⁸ It is to the latter that I will eventually return, finding in the work of Amalia Kahana-Carmon, the subject of chapter 3, direct traces of Beauvoir's take on the woman question and its relation to the two other others—the Jew and the black. But, before arriving there, another question is in order: How did Beauvoir's legacy—and her conceptualization of woman as other in particular—survive the feminist upheavals of recent decades?

2. Beauvoir's "Daughters": Otherness as Difference

An interesting clue (already cited in the introduction) is offered by historian Karen Offen, who in 1988 traced the reception history of *The Second Sex* as part of her outline of the changing definitions of the term *feminism*: "Beauvoir's arguments were received with greater enthusiasm in English-speaking countries than in her own," apparently because of the sociational legacy of French feminism.⁹ Thus, while France developed what

Often labels relational feminism, featuring “the primacy of a companionate, non-hierarchical, male-female couple as the basic unit of society” and emphasizing women’s rights as *women* (defined mainly by their *nurturing* capacities; emphasis added), Anglo-American feminists followed Beauvoir’s individualist feminism, emphasizing the abstract concept of human rights and “celebrating the quest for personal independence (or autonomy) in all aspects of life, while downplaying . . . childbearing and its attending responsibilities” (136).

It is the latter, of course, that won the day with the 1960s “explosion” of second-wave feminism in the English-speaking countries. Beauvoir’s anatomy of woman’s otherness has inspired a feminism whose goal was the eradication of all those inequalities blamed on the sociopolitical alterity of women. In due time (a decade or so is the usual delay in importing American ideas to Israel) it also infiltrated Hebrew literature, but not without some typically Jewish modifications (see chapter 6). This orientation, alternatively called equal rights, individualist, humanist, or liberal feminism, reduced—as followers often do—the duality and ambiguity of woman’s alterity as described by Beauvoir, preserving only the pejorative connotation of the concept. Like Beauvoir, however, it equally applied itself to other underprivileged groups: racial and ethnic minorities, as well as social classes. The dubious nature of the latter (given the a priori middle-class pigeonholing of any theory-producing feminist) is in fact an ironic repetition of Virginia Woolf’s last-ditch attempt to enlist the solidarity of the working class on the eve of World War II. Building on her version of female difference, the identity of the “Outsider” she had developed throughout the 1930s (“codified” in *Three Guineas*, 1938), she now tried to reach the commoners. That her valiant address to “commoners and outsiders like ourselves” had a rather meager success is apparently a historical lesson still not learned by contemporary feminism.¹⁰

For a more successful unfolding of Beauvoir’s legacy we need to look at the contemporary reinvention of *gender*. Following her famous statement “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (*The Second Sex*, 301)—yet in contrast to her ostensible biologism—Anglo-American feminism developed the concept of gender to distinguish between given (biological) sexual differences and those gender *relations* that are constructed by social and cultural processes. The aim was to tease out the “socially imposed division of the sexes” from the web of natural difference (henceforth labeled sex), as Gayle Rubin had initially defined it.¹¹

The transformation of gender from a grammatical to a social science

category, and the study of the sex-gender system that this category has made possible, were perceived as an antidote to the narrowness of feminist studies, a corrective allowing for the analysis of “masculinism” in analogy to feminism. It thus promised to “liberate more than women. . . . It would liberate human personality from the straightjacket of gender,”¹² that very jacket that *produces* perceived disymmetry and perpetuates *representations* of otherness. In due time, however, followers were encouraged to “go beyond gender,”¹³ or to find a third term elsewhere, outside the masculine/feminine dyad, because gender, no less than its precursor, sex, was found implicated in binarism, that major culprit in the annals of post-modern critique.¹⁴ Indeed, recent studies explicitly alert us to the “slippage between ‘sex’ and ‘gender,’”¹⁵ cautioning that “‘gender’ is silently replacing ‘sex’ as the referential base for postmodern theories.”¹⁶ In short, within less than two decades the sex/gender distinction is already losing its edge, while gender has been redefined as a “technology” or a “performance” (masquerade).¹⁷

The importing of gender to Israel, meanwhile, has had a particularly interesting history. Though as a sociocultural category of analysis it has slowly infiltrated Israeli feminist research of the last two decades, it did not leave much of a mark on feminist literature. In fact, a Hebrew translation of “gender,” *migdar*, was not even invented until a year or two ago. I explore in chapter 7 the psycholinguistic reasons for this difficulty. It merely suffices to point out here that the only Israeli writer who directly wrestled with this issue—and not out of any theoretical concerns—was Netiva Ben Yehuda, the Palmach fighter whose impassioned conflict between sexual equality and Zionist loyalty is recorded in the epigraph to this study (see the introduction and chapter 7). In a typically Israeli way she had to invent *gender* (using her own linguistic ingenuity) in order to grapple with the sexual discrimination she experienced as a distinguished fighter in the 1948 War of Independence.

But, to return to our narrative of gender theory, ironically, the continuous search for the *roots* of the gender straightjacket led back to the realm of psychoanalysis—the very discipline whose explanatory power had been dismissed—and for good reasons—by the foremother of feminism (“All psychoanalysts systematically reject the idea of *choice* and the correlated concept of value, and therein lies the intrinsic weakness of the system,” Beauvoir, 50). This was not, however, a return to Freud, whose female psychology had been found lacking, to say the least (58), but to post-Freudian psychology. Thus, while Beauvoir herself tried to account for male ambivalence toward

the female by the somewhat circular argument that “the source of these terrors lies in the fact that in the Other, quite beyond reach, alterity, otherness, abide” (191), recent explanations rely on psychoanalytic assessments of early *preoedipal* family dynamics, where the mother rather than the (oedipal) father plays a major role. This so-called object relation theory, developed mainly in England (Fairburn, Guntrip, Winnicott), helped Nancy Chodorow, for example, to question Freud’s oedipal masterplot. Since it is this paradigmatic transition from the oedipal masterplot to the maternal narrative that we will encounter at the heart of the feminist project in Israeli women’s (and some men’s) fiction, I want to take a closer look at Chodorow’s study and its repercussions on subsequent scholarship.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* Chodorow offers a new definition of woman’s alterity. Arguing that, in contrast to girls’ identification with their mothers, boys develop their sense of self in defensive *opposition* to the mother, she conceptualized their later denigration of the feminine as a *defense* against their earlier identification with the phallic *preoedipal* mother. Despite the explicitly psychoanalytic language, the legacy of Beauvoir’s “fearsome other” is quite clear here, as is the (Hegelian) agonistic perception of the construction of (masculine!) subjectivity. What is new, however, is the (quite disturbing) transformation of philosophy’s generalized abstract other into a flesh and blood, sociologically (if not biologically) necessary female (m)other. Motherhood is again (as for Beauvoir) the culprit, but on a deeper, *unconscious* level. Since it perpetually reproduces psychological differences between the sexes, it of necessity reinforces female alterity: the presumably relational, easily malleable ego of woman, the result of mother-daughter identification (and the cause of her attachment needs), in opposition to man’s fixed, inflexible ego boundaries, the expression of a separation anxiety caused by fear of an ostensible identification with the maternal.

Widespread as Chodorow’s theory is, it is not without its problems, and not only for its inadequacy in explaining “male domination” as it purports to do.¹⁸ No less troubling is the substitution of bedrock psychological differences for biological ones. Recent revisions critique the principle of gender polarity altogether, showing its binarisms to be false and culturally constructed. Thus Jessica Benjamin concludes her study of the problem of domination, *The Bonds of Love*, with the statement that “ironically, then, the ideal of freedom carries within it the seeds of domination—freedom means fleeing or subjugating the other; autonomy means an escape from dependency,” while Miriam Johnson challenges the presumed separation

versus attachment dissymmetry between the genders by arguing, “Whereas a woman’s relational needs get defined as her ‘dependency,’ men may disguise their dependency needs because they are being met everyday by women. . . . [Financial] dependence must not be confused with psychological dependency.”¹⁹

These critiques notwithstanding, Chodorow’s study has had a decisive impact on the perception of female otherness precisely because it made possible a shift in the valorization of otherness from negative to positive. Despite her indictment of the institution of mothering (which Chodorow suggests fixing by a change in child-rearing arrangements),²⁰ her analysis brought to the fore aspects of female psychological growth that allowed for the beginning of a new trend—the celebration of mother-daughter bonding and its concomitant “female” identity.

This change of perspective should come as no surprise. Beauvoir’s valorization of male subjectivity had come under attack by the 1980s, and, with it, “liberal” feminism. Derogatorily labeled masculinist or assimilationist, it has recently been charged with making masculinity a universal norm of liberation and achievement, thereby perpetuating traditional phallogocentric dichotomies. Between the publication of Carol Giligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) and Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* (1989) Anglo-American gender studies was transformed.²¹ Refusing the perspective of the male gaze (which had been explored by feminist cinema theorists since the mid-seventies),²² these “separatist” feminists now *embraced* their otherness rather than deploring it. If black was beautiful, so was the feminine. Beauvoir’s wish for reciprocity was finally taking shape, at least in theory; although probably not the one she was looking forward to. For now American women—though not exactly a minority—extolled their *difference* under the banner of cultural pluralism. As for Israeli feminists—as usual, there was a delay in catching up with their Western sisters, but we can hear some echoes of separatist feminism in the Israel of the late 1990s (as I argue in chapter 6).

For the inspiration of this global change we need to cross back, ironically, to the continent, to meet Beauvoir’s own unfaithful daughters. If we recall the tradition of French matrimonial (relational) feminism described by Offen, we should not wonder at its latest phase. Here woman’s alterity has totally shed its pejorative meaning and has come to signify her particularly embodied and engendered being in the world. These sexual difference theorists (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig) celebrate their otherness by privileging the very negativities tradi-

tionally attributed to women in Western civilization. Beauvoir's priorities are turned upside down, one by one, in what could be best described as an oedipal agon (in the spirit of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* [1975] and contra Gilbert and Gubar's objections).²³

In a massive rewriting of the history (or at least selected chapters thereof) of the mirror and gaze metaphors, those traditional emblems of subjectivity (avoided by Beauvoir, we may recall!), Luce Irigaray has exposed the complicity of philosophy itself in the perpetuation of sexual binarism and hierarchy, in the privileging of the masculine, and in the production of female alterity. Her *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) is a parodic feminist/deconstructive reading of Freud (and—indirectly—Lacan), Plato and Aristotle, Hegel and Descartes. Identifying the specular/speculative tradition as phallogocentric (“Yes, man’s eye—understood as substitute for the penis”),²⁴ she rejects its terms altogether, dismissing the theory of her mentor (Lacan) in the process. Through this dismissal Beauvoir’s invitation to women to attain subjectivity is interpreted as another reobjectivization, because “Any Theory of the ‘Subject’ Has Always Been Appropriated by the ‘Masculine.’”²⁵ “Woman has no gaze, no discourse for her specific specularization that would allow her to identify with herself (as same).”²⁶ Self-identity, self-consciousness, subjectivity are rejected by Irigaray as a masculinist obsession with sameness and oneness, the expression of fear of *multiplicity* and *fluid* ego boundaries. The latter, metaphorized by female sexuality and anatomy (or, more accurately, by selected parts thereof; see *This Sex Which is Not One*, 1977), are the very markers of female difference she invites us to applaud.

Although Irigaray is hard to pin down, the source from which she derives (more often than not) this positive female difference is none other than the *maternal*—precisely that biological function that Beauvoir saw as the obstacle in women’s route toward equality, subjectivity, and transcendence. Like Chodorow’s followers—albeit with different emphasis and for differing aims—Irigaray privileges the mother-daughter symbiotic bonding as the root (at least metaphorically) of female empathy and psychological fluidity; unlike them, however, she used this otherness to deconstruct the heterosexual paradigm. Much like Adrienne Rich on the other side of the Atlantic, who moved from the problematization of motherhood (*Of Woman Born*, 1976) to a “lesbian continuum” (1980),²⁷ Irigaray moved from a critique of phallogocentric essentialism to the idealization of gynocentrism, female sexual multiplicity, and homoeroticism. This progression was reflected also in her style of writing. Associative, richly allu-

sive and metaphoric, at times even ungrammatical, it challenged from within the logocentric expository prose of philosophical discourse that *The Second Sex* had so dutifully sustained. This is *écriture féminine* par excellence, the ultimate exaltation of sexual difference.²⁸

The foundational essay of this orientation is Hélène Cixous’s 1975 “The Laugh of the Medusa,” which advocated experimental, disruptive, and unsettling “writing through the body.” The declared purpose of this mode of writing is precisely to inscribe an other language, that female language for which Hardy’s exceptional heroine was unwittingly searching a century ago but could not yet name (see the epigraph to this chapter). Now women’s tongue is alternately named the “(m)other’s voice” or the “discourse of the hysteric,”²⁹ and is highly valorized and idealized. Feminine writers—among whom, in an anti-essentialist move, some major male authors are counted—are presumed to lift the lid of repression off female otherness (symbolized by the body and the hysteric’s desire), thereby challenging the mind-body split and other logocentric binarisms. That by so doing they in fact maintain the very dichotomy that *The Second Sex* had set out to undo is, of course, one of the ironies of the recent history of female difference.

Another irony awaits us on the other side of the Mediterranean. As I show in chapters 5 and 6, the exploration of some of the major issues foregrounded by sexual difference feminists—sameness versus difference, the nexus of mother-daughter relations and the lesbian continuum, and, finally, the writing of the body (rather than through the body)—was carried out in Israel by the novelist and journalist Shulamith Hareven, who more than any other writer raised the flag *against* the category of women writers and the identification of women’s style as different or recognizably feminine. Conversely, some of the most traditional, essentialist characterizations of female alterity are to be found in the ostensible epitome of Israeli *écriture féminine*, the works of Amalia Kahana-Carmon (chapter 3). These paradoxes are resolved, finally, in the work of Ruth Almog (chapter 8), who explores the mother-daughter continuum without abandoning the oedipal plot and grafts the discourse of the hysteric onto a masculinist narrative—successfully challenging many boundaries, old and new.

3. Postmodernism’s Other: Mother’s Body, Mother’s Tongue

The irony of this multifaceted picture increases as we probe a little deeper into the ostensible analogy between theories of difference on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the United States gender was originally conceptualized as an anthropological category, never losing sight of its political implications. Inspired by Foucault's analysis of the structures of power and domination operating within the sociocultural system, this orientation has recently yielded ever growing differentiation, demanding to speak the particularity of more narrowly defined social groups. Woman was replaced by women, feminism by womanism (black women). Third world women and women of color, social classes and diverging sexual orientations—each group insists on a historical and cultural particularism that generic feminism or even gender studies cannot address.³⁰ Responding to the postmodern crisis of representation by eschewing the universality of the traditional discourses of subjectivity (philosophy and psychoanalysis), these others nevertheless redefine their social space in terms of collective selfhood, often “transforming some other group into ‘an other,’” to paraphrase Beauvoir again. In this case the reproduction of the American scene on the Israeli stage did not lag behind: recently, Oriental (*mizrahiot*, rather than Sephardi) feminists have created their own organization, attuned to the familiar politization of American gender theories and goading the apologetic mea culpa of leading Ashkenazi feminists.³¹

The conceptualization of sexual difference in France is quite different, almost diametrically opposed. To begin with, the basic concepts of sexual difference and *écriture féminine* are not as originally female products as they may seem to be, and neither is the celebration of woman's alterity. As convincingly demonstrated by Alice Jardine in *Gynesis* and Teresa de Lauretis in *Technologies of Gender*, postmodernist discourse habitually named as *la femme* or *le féminin* all those spaces external to the (metaphysical, psychoanalytic, social) system from which it tried to deconstruct or unhinge the “humanist” metanarratives of the West (Truth, History, Man). Thus, for Lacan, the “Subject comes to be in the field of the Other” precisely because the Cartesian (and Hegelian-Sartrean-Beauvoirian) subject has lost its mastery, priority, and stability; he is subject to (that is, subjected to) the system into which he is initiated, rather than the subject of it (that is, its agentic manipulator).³² That power is attributed to the Unconscious, the Other with a capital O, which Lacan genders as feminine. (Hence: “The woman—she does not exist.” The Other is by definition that which is beyond the symbolic, outside our system of representation.) As for Derrida, his other is writing, *écriture*—his arch-metaphor for the endless play of signifiers, the deferral of closure and the dissemination of meaning—in short, the locus of all the revisionary and subversive ener-

gies deployed in the deconstruction of logocentric signification and phallogocentric binarisms. Less consistently but nevertheless in a tangible way, *écriture* is naturally gendered as feminine (and not only because of its French grammatical inflection).³³

In a paradoxical way, then, while women as such are almost absent from the theories of the leading spokesmen of postmodernism, the abstract notion of the female other has come to occupy center stage in their discourse. Yet, even more paradoxically, this presumed transvaluation (Nietzsche) does nothing for the deconstruction of the hoary dichotomy of male-female. Whether or not we see the revolutionary deployment of the feminine as a (dangerous?) reification of Hegelian negativity, as has been recently claimed,³⁴ we can agree, I believe, that this teleology does not expunge the feminine of its original negativities; although marked positively by Derrida (and Lacan, Foucault, Lyotard), the feminine remains entrapped in the old binarism. It is exclusion, absence, lack, unarticulated matter and unrepresentable body, nothingness and even god, in short, the ultimate Other, “all that [postmodern] Man desires and all that he cannot attain” (again, citing Beauvoir).

In (women) theorists' attempts to explain this paradox we can predictably detect shades of the demonized female other, the so-called phallic mother. While Alice Jardine has implied male paranoia, Jane Flax has gone so far as to take Chodorow's suggestions to their logical extremity (absurdity?), claiming that postmodernist deconstruction of subjectivity derives from “the need [of its male theorists] to evade, deny or repress the importance of early childhood experiences, especially mother-child relationships, in the constitution of the self and the culture more generally.”³⁵ If we take Flax's “diagnosis” seriously (which I am not sure I can bring myself to do), we are compelled to face an unflattering scene of competition, a tragicomic or even grotesque pathology that cruelly undercuts deconstruction's aspiration to revise the phallogocentric discourses of Western metaphysics and epistemology.

But even if we do not go that far, we may now be in a better position to appreciate the impasse in which French female intellectuals have found themselves. With no recourse to Cartesian subjectivity, and with the feminine taken up by their male peers, they have opted to seize those revolutionary spaces of *abstract* feminine otherness and make them their own by *reembodying* them. Hence the exaltation of female anatomy and female homoeroticism, the hystericization of feminine writing, and the exuberant celebration of female desire and the maternal function—precisely that

demonized, unrepresentable ghost *still* lurking beyond the confines of androcentric postmodern metaphysics. As we have already implied, this aspect of continental theory is the least developed in Israeli fiction, save for some experiments in the 1990s by mostly (but not only) younger writers; some traces of it can be found, however, in the latest work by both Kahana-Carmon and Hareven (chapters 3, 6) as well as in Almog's major novel (chapter 8).

Although claimed to be symbolic and iconic rather than literal, this glorification of feminine difference exposes its propagators (on both sides of the Atlantic) to charges of reverse essentialism. In a paradoxical way it is not a Derridean *differance* (that is, a third term outside the traditional binarism of male subjectivity and female otherness) that has been constructed in French feminine writing but an exaggerated version of traditional representations of female otherness, the only difference being the reversal of its valorization (from negative to positive).

Moreover, the feminine (in fact, hysterical) exuberance of this writing blurs the often thin line between description and prescription. Is it claimed that the other sex indeed exhibits all the feminine traits idolized by sexual difference writers, or are these traits cited as models of femininity to be imitated or adopted across gender lines? If meant descriptively, this portrait will no doubt fail the test of reality, if meant prescriptively, then another alterity has been created, and with it a new binarism, that of homoeroticism versus heteroeroticism. Would it be terribly politically incorrect to ask (following Yehuda Amichai; see the epigraph to this chapter) where heterosexuality would find its (theoretical) space, "between the two tightly fitting halves" of the suggested new order?³⁶ And would it be too intellectually retrograde to remind ourselves at this juncture of the veteran Freudian concept of bisexuality?³⁷ Of Virginia Woolf's androgyny? Of the even older Hegelian "internal dialectic" of self and other? In short, of the various attempts to contain difference rather than project and eject it?³⁸

4. *Empowering the M/Other?*

A solution of sorts awaits us in the work of Julia Kristeva, who supposedly conceptualizes the other beyond gender dichotomy altogether. Dismissing *écriture féminine* and sexual difference as reinforcing received binary oppositions, she considers as other that revolutionary impulse which fractures the symbolic order by introducing preverbal, preoedipal, and unrep-

resented patterns of signification that she names the "Semiotic."³⁹ Although descriptively and functionally similar to the generic feminine other of postmodern discourse, its closest conceptual relative is Lacan's Imaginary, again with the predictable reversal of its valorization. Like the Imaginary, the Semiotic is derived from infantile bodily and emotional experience, which is naturally available to *both* genders; similarly, it is *contained within* the symbolic order rather than projected beyond its boundaries (as is the other of postmodernism); unlike it, however, it is perceived to be the source of subversive creativity, a potentiality highly situated on Kristeva's scale of priorities. Furthermore, by identifying this maternal other in the avant-garde writing of Artaud, Mallarmé, Joyce, and other (mostly male) writers, Kristeva insists on its genderlessness. Her theory seems to transcend gender alterity, then, by positioning otherness within subjectivity itself (decentered as the latter may be), irrespective of gender.

Have we finally reached our destination or, rather, that of gender theories? Is Kristeva's maternal Semiotic the third term that goes beyond binarism, beyond essence by, paradoxically, diving inside? An archimedean point within the system rather than without? Has she managed to counteract the paranoid marginalization of the (m)other by including rather than excluding maternal otherness and difference?

If the reception and dissemination of her ideas are any measure, she may indeed have done just that,⁴⁰ ironically at the expense of feminist political correctness. Her notorious declaration—that the task of "third generation" women [*sic*], not feminists, is the "de-dramatization of the 'fight to the death' between rival groups and thus between the sexes"—readily supports both sides of the irony.⁴¹ But, beyond the pragmatic gripe of political feminism,⁴² her conceptualization does not get around the (by now predictable) charge of complicity with received representations of feminine (or, in her case, maternal) otherness. By relegating, as she does, the question of gender difference to the realm of metaphysics (an altogether suspect discourse in her frame of [postmodernist] thinking, as her "Woman's Time" makes clear), she does not get rid of it. It returns through the kitchen door, so to speak, through the unresolved tension between the commonality of human (infantile) experience and the biological one-genderedness of maternity. Taking both as unquestioned givens, Kristeva is unable to allow both genders an *equal* use of the Semiotic other. It is not by chance that the models of her "revolutionary poetics" are male writers. Their sex/gender distance (difference?) from the maternal protects them, she says, from the risk of psychotic disintegration

that would threaten a woman under the same circumstance. We encounter an illustration of this dogma in Kahana-Carmon's early writing, in the figure of Tehila (chapter 3).⁴³

The psychoanalytic underpinnings of this logic are tiresomely familiar. So is the old adage about the madwoman in the attic.⁴⁴ But how are we to account for women's creativity? For instance, for Julia Kristeva's protean fecundity?

It is not my intention to grapple with this question here. Fortunately, Kristeva's amazingly rich and multifaceted creativity seems to belie her own theory. For this visit to the promised land "beyond gender" of her making turns out to be quite disturbing. Even if we do not go so far as to endorse the criticism that her "concept of the subject in process, which dissolves female subjectivity entirely, fails to answer—indeed it does not attempt to answer—the question of the engenderment of subjectivity as feminine. Rather, it leaves no place for it,"⁴⁵ it is no doubt clear that under the guise of a progressive theory, which attractively names its most privileged term after the maternal, Kristeva once again conceptualizes women's creativity as achieved only at a high cost. The inclusion of gender difference within the system fails to obliterate women's partial exclusion. If their access to the site of artistic agency is not totally blocked, it is fraught with grave danger (ironically—because it is too close for comfort). "In her case studies," argues one psychoanalytic study, "the mother is defined as *the* problem for her female patients. This way of defining the mother works to restrict the agency of women. . . . For Kristeva, avant-garde writing only offers the *man* a chance to be in touch with his primal femininity while safely transcending this deadly force."⁴⁶ In the final analysis Kristeva's system, presumably beyond gender, allows woman to buy her way into its maternal site of energy and excitement only at the cost of preserving intact the existing paternal order.

Once again the maternal is at the heart of this paradox, as observed by Domna Stanton in her insightful critique of the "maternal metaphor" employed by contemporary gender theorists.⁴⁷ Indeed, it is the ambiguous position of this female-feminine excess that emerges as a major parameter for the conceptualization of gender alterity. In some sense the analysis of female otherness carried out by gender theorists for the past fifty years may be reduced to just that: the anchoring of the general ambivalence toward woman—as summarized by Beauvoir—to its ostensible origin, motherhood. Whether demonized or idolized, concretized or

metaphorized, it is this Derridian (biological? cultural?) *excess* that has replaced Freud's anatomical female *lack* (castration) as the marker of sexual difference.⁴⁸

United around this single shared premise, gender scholars are nevertheless divided by their evaluation of its theoretical and pragmatic implications. In fact, the distance traveled by gender studies may be measured by the distance between Beauvoir's and Kristeva's positions on this issue. While the first critically views maternity as the social institution that hinders woman's journey toward autonomy and transcendence, the latter valiantly grapples with the constricting ambivalences of the Catholic tradition she has inherited,⁴⁹ attempting to recast the maternal as the psychological locus of androgynous revolution and creativity. There is even room to ask, I believe, whether Kristeva's thematizing of Maryology in the midst of the atheist (to the exclusion of Lacan?) discourse of postmodernism does not signify a return of the repressed, does not bring to the surface yet another dimension of anti-universalist difference, adding religion to the coordinates (sex, race, class, etc.) deployed in recent gender analysis.

Indeed, the addition of this parameter may explain some of the differences among the various feminist strands followed here, including the Israeli. For one of the conclusions to be drawn from our brief detour through the landscape of postmodernist gender theory is that the position held by motherhood in a given cultural system may be crucial for the attitudes developed in that system toward the woman question. Contemporary psychosocial analyses of this institution may merely be scratching the surface as long as they do not take into consideration the ethnoreligious systems underlying their object of research. There is a world of difference, as we know, between the respective institutions of motherhood in the Christian and Jewish traditions.⁵⁰ To do full justice to these differences, a wide-scale comparative analysis is needed. Such a probe, which is obviously beyond the boundaries of the present study, could perhaps begin with the observation that the most extreme positions on both sides of motherhood were conceived in Catholic France, by French-writing women (who have often rejected feminism proper). Conversely, writers in English, self-acknowledged feminists, seem to have favored middle-of-the-road compromises, perhaps following the example of Virginia Woolf, whose own struggle with motherhood is described and reinterpreted in chapter 4.

That the latter tradition is naturally more congenial to Israeli feminism should come as no surprise. My readings of Israeli literature in the fol-

lowing chapters are therefore mostly framed within the legacy of Virginia Woolf, focusing on those parts of it that Israeli feminists have reshaped in their own image. This legacy sheds light on the attempts of contemporary Israeli women authors to negotiate the impasses and conflicts beleaguering contemporary gender theory as well as feminist practice.

First among these authors is Amalia Kahana-Carmon, a long-acknowledged practitioner of Woolf's poetics in Hebrew literature, who, I argue, single-handedly foregrounded both otherness and difference in Israeli culture, weaving together Woolf's modernist poetics and Beauvoir's existential feminism. If the feminist horizon of expectations in this recalcitrant culture has somewhat changed during the last two decades, it is due, in no small measure, to the creative tenacity of Kahana-Carmon, whose fiction and nonfiction continuously streamlined the message.



Empowering the Other: Amalia Kahana-Carmon

Gentiles and Jews, they're like men and women, my father used to say. "Why," I once asked.

"Only because of preconceived judgments. Of each side: about oneself, about the other, too." My father smiled. Each side has its own picture, my father always said, its portrait of the other. Therefore, when addressing someone from the other side, it is to the portrait and not to the person that one would speak.

—Amalia Kahana-Carmon,
The Bridge of the Green Duck, Up in Montifer

"It is to the portrait and not to the person that one would speak"—a rather intriguing definition of *otherness* to find in a work of fiction.¹ In this extended metaphor Amalia Kahana-Carmon, one of Israel's leading prose fiction writers, points out the tragic source of otherness—the unavoidable split between signified and signifier, the person and the portrait, the subject and one's predetermined perception of what it/he/she might be.

At the same time, this is a paradoxical definition, as it cancels the unidirectionality usually associated with otherness. If "*each* side has its own picture. . . its portrait of the other," then there is no Other with a capital O. And there is no privileged Self either—with a capital S, one might say—no center stage against which one is to weigh the otherness of the other. By having *each* side functioning *equally* as the other's other, Amalia Kahana-Carmon seems to highlight sameness within otherness. What she has achieved by this maneuver is not only a cancellation of the easy identification of the other with the marginal and the inferior but also the problematization of the notion of privileged subjecthood.

That this repositioning of self and other would be penned by a woman should come as no surprise. After all, "reading against the grain" has long been identified as a feminist ploy.² What is striking, nevertheless, about *The Bridge of the Green Duck* is that it embeds the woman problem—in the