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A Woman's Place is in the Kitchen:

Internalized Sexism in Female Writing of the Second Aliyah

The Second Aliyah and the rise of the New Yishuv are often praised for the development of new sectors within Palestine, including the labor sector and the kibbutz movement. Many members of the Second Aliyah were young, single idealists from Russia, influenced by the rise of socialist movements at the turn of the 20th century. Of the approximately 3000 immigrants, 17% were female (Reinharz). Within Europe, the Zionist movement promoted gender equality. At the Third World Zionist Congress in 1899, women's suffrage within the organization was deemed a fundamental right (Reinharz). Many of the women had fought for the right to settle land in Palestine as equals with the men from their Zionist youth groups, and these women moved to Palestine to realize the pioneering goals of social Zionism alongside their male counterparts. The women of the Second Aliyah expected gender equality in Palestine largely because of their experiences with the Zionist movement.

In contrast to the optimistic ideals, women of the Second Aliyah struggled to find their place in a masculine-driven Palestine. Though many desired to act as workers in the community, many of their male equivalents did not accept them as equals, and were especially belittling when it came to the women's ability to participate in labor activities. Kibbutzim mainly employed women in domestic tasks. The women often did not have kibbutz membership, and were instead seen as hired help rather than comrades. At Kibbutz Degania, women "were not

registered in the annual contract made with the Palestine Office (of the Zionist movement) [...] nor received the monthly salary which the Office paid to the men” (Yuval-Davis 5-6). While socialist Zionism ideology had promised women equality, the kibbutz settlements were a “pioneering society that championed images of strength and masculinity” and the women’s desire to participate “encountered considerable resistance from their male comrades” (Kaplan and Penslar 65).

With their expectations unfulfilled, women often experienced “feelings of discrimination, inequity, being held off and being kept away from realizing aspirations similar to those of their fellow male immigrants” (Ben-Artzi 27). Their dissatisfaction manifested in their writings, both from the period and in reflections. Through the study of these women’s works, it is clear that not only were women frustrated with the discrimination they experienced from men who kept them from their desire to work the land, but the women often adopted the men’s doubts. Men often imposed limitations on women’s participation in the kibbutz society, and while these restrictions prevented women from realizing their full potential, internalized sexism often prevented women from even fully acknowledging their own merit and the possibility of their achievement.

In Memoir

While women were viewed as inferior by many of their male contemporaries of the Second Aliyah, later interest in their lives preserved their experiences in the words of the women themselves. The Moezet Hapoalot, or Council of Women Workers, published the anthology *Divrei poalot* in 1928 and later translated the collection into English as *The Plough Woman* (Kaznelson-Rubashov xxiv). Included in the tome is a collection of memoirs, including that of Tehiya Lieberman, an immigrant from the Second Aliyah who worked in Petah Tikvah.

Lieberson's memoir begins with making a note of how few women were in the settlement: "only four [young women] among them [the workers]: two seamstresses, one stocking knitter, and one who received remittances from her parents" (13). By opening her story with a list of the other women present, Lieberson not only contextualizes her experience as a worker by relating how few other women worked at the kibbutz, but she also demonstrates that the other women were consumed with domestic tasks or did not work at all because they were reliant on their parents. Even when the other women did partake in physical labor, "both seamstresses would turn orange packers," a simple task involving little effort (ibid. 13). This set-up of a simple, domestic woman contrasts sharply with Lieberson's description of her own desires: "my heart was set on plain labor on the soil" (13). The usage of synecdoche to represent the author with her "heart" emphasizes her strong drive to embark on "plain labor," as well as her emotional attachment to work. Additionally, the colloquial language, "set on," used to describe her desire highlights a simple, unrefined want, which is then solidified through the adjective "plain" to describe "labor." She is willing to partake in any kind of labor, including simple work free of skill or pride.

While Lieberson's desires were fulfilled, she kept her tasks secret, with fear of judgment as the main motivation for this concealment. Though she "went out to work with the spade" she had to "come home evenings to the colony without any tools" (ibid. 13). Lieberson again uses juxtaposition to contrast her position with that of the other women. While she was comfortable with manual labor, as represented with the "spade," she had to hide the "tools" from the other members of the camp who might disapprove of her labor. She then describes "leav[ing] the regular path and mak[ing] my way through backyards, so that no one should know that [she] was working with the men" (ibid. 13). While the author previously did not identify from which

members of the colony she was hiding her work, when she describes returning to the camp in a roundabout way, “no one” is contrasted with “the men.” The comrades she fears judgment from are the women. While Lieberon fights against societal restrictions, she fears the opinions of other women still operating under an oppressive mentality.

Though Lieberon hid her work from the other women, she was not reassured of her abilities by the men with whom she worked. Lieberon points to the absurdity involved in the men’s doubts, as, “[t]he workers themselves were against my choice—they were genuinely afraid that I would break down under the labor” (13). The men’s worry is hyperbolic, as Lieberon humorously points out with the use of “genuinely.” The labor is not very strenuous, as she is still working with the “spade,” presumably digging holes to plant new orange saplings. The men’s concern appears ridiculous and suggests their discomfort with Lieberon working with them comes from stereotypical ideas of women’s capabilities. Interestingly, while “genuinely [...] break down” suggests the workers were afraid of a physical collapse, the duality of the phrase suggests the possibility of a mental breakdown, which also upholds gender stereotypes as “hysteria” was a condition largely associated with women. The care shown by the men appears patronizing regardless of the interpretation.

Perhaps Lieberon uses the double entendre to suggest her future depletion of self-assurance. Though she initially “would not listen” to the men’s concerns, she recalls, “[t]he doubts of my fellow workers crept into me” and she “was tormented by the question whether she had chosen the right path” (ibid. 13-14). Lieberon describes her internalization of the men’s doubts as a slow, creeping process, with the end-product being a constantly resonating, tormenting doubt. This doubt eventually leads Lieberon to leave her manual labor job and return to the women in their orange packing. The two confines of her situation, women who differ from

her in their complacency and men who doubt her competency, lead Lieberman to abandon her drive.

When Lieberman attempts to find a stable position at the kibbutz, she is directly confronted with societal challenges in the form of standard practices. At the colony's employment agency, she discovers "there were only three colonists who were prepared to take women workers, and none of them had a place for me" (ibid. 14). The use of the term "prepared" conveys the male laborer's belief that hiring a woman was a risk, and Lieberman's return to enumerating within her experiences reiterates how few men were willing to follow through on the Zionist ideologies of gender equality. While there were three colonists who claimed to be willing to hire women, none of them were actually willing to hire Lieberman. Dramatic irony allows the reader to know that Lieberman was one of five women when she arrived at the Petah Tikvah colony, and the only woman who labored as the men did, suggesting that the male colonists were only willing to hire women for domestic tasks, if at all. After Lieberman finds success in grafting trees, male workers from Petah Tikvah who had "gone up to the farm at the Kineret" had to "appl[y] to the director to let [Lieberman] join" them (15). Though Lieberman is successful, experienced, and knowledgeable in agriculture, her male counterparts have to apply for her and ask the director to let her join the kibbutz. They also must specify that Lieberman will not work in the kitchen because working there "was the almost invariable rule with women" (15). Though she is able to work "side by side with the men," Lieberman acknowledges that she is the outlier in a society that still largely restricts women to domestic tasks (15).

Lieberman's memoir acts as a sparse outline for the three years of her life she spent working in Petah Tikvah. The memoirs in *The Ploughwoman* were collected between 1915 and 1928, so Lieberman's memoir was written after the fact (Kaplan and Penslar 65). In some

respects, the memoir allows for a greater sense of self-reflection than a diary entry, and Lieberman's writing conveys her realization of society's confines and the irrational behavior of her male coworkers. As a piece written long after the years described, details of events are largely unreported, but Lieberman partially uses this limitation to her advantage. The author's sparing use of names and character descriptions helps illustrate the life of an isolated individual. As a young woman, Lieberman found herself in constant juxtaposition with members of her own gender but unwelcomed by members of the gender she wished to join in labor, and perhaps her comrades go unnamed due to Lieberman's dissociation with the groups. The memoir allows for a nuanced representation of the self, but it lacks specific information, with little description and dialogue. While Lieberman describes the discrimination she faced and the emotions she felt, specific instances of rejection are not presented and the reader must rely on Lieberman's generalized claims.

In Narrative

Mirroring their own experiences, fiction writing by women of the Second Aliyah conveyed the theme of debilitating words hindering a woman's ability to participate in the kibbutz culture. Batya Brenner's autobiographical short story "I Became a Worker" depicts the draining pressure women felt from men in the Yishuv, who commonly questioned a woman's capabilities. When the protagonist Amunah first enters the workers' club, she is bombarded with comments from men about her appearance. The men do not address her personally, instead asking each other "who's this? Pretty isn't she?" as if she cannot hear them (Brenner 47). Boldly, she asks, "[s]uppose I am pretty? What's wrong with that?" (ibid. 47). Rather than address her objection to objectification, a worker dismissively shouts out, "[w]e can see from your clothes you aren't a worker" (ibid. 47). The trivializing attitude and focus on her appearance leaves

Amunah with “a strange chill of disappointment” (ibid. 47). The dialogue between Amunah and other characters continues to focus on the aesthetic, with another worker asking, “I suppose you expected a great big hall, with lots of gold framed pictures on the wall” (ibid. 48). Not only does the man presume to know what Amunah is thinking, but he assumes Amunah is disappointed by the appearance of the workers’ club, rather than by the workers themselves. When Amunah surprises the man by expressing her desire to become a worker, the man claims, “[t]he *kvutzot* aren’t for young [women] like you [...] it’s just a dream” and continues to question her ability to participate, “wondering whether [she] would ever become a real worker” (ibid. 48, 49). The visual rhetoric of the men and their constant questioning of Amunah’s abilities leads to disappointment and sadness as Amunah starts to doubt whether she will ever gain a position at a *kvutzah*.

In an effort to prove her self-worth to others, Amunah changes her behavior to demonstrate that she can handle tasks by herself. As a testament to the effect of the men’s comments about her appearance, Amunah repacks her bag when going to the *kvutzah*: “I’m ashamed to land there with all this baggage—like a bride getting ready for her wedding. I want to leave out my holiday clothes, and I want to take just a little underwear with me” (ibid. 50). Amunah is worried about having too much clothing, which could lead to others assuming she cares greatly about her appearance, and of having nice “holiday clothes.” Because she has been hurt by what others assume based on her appearance, she sacrifices comfort in order to simulate a minimalist lifestyle. Her association between appearance and the female “bride” establishes that she has internalized the correlation between a fascination with looks and femininity, with both corresponding to a way of life she does not desire. In order to prove that she can handle labor, she insists on carrying her own bags when men offer to carry them for her. The second

time a man offers to carry her bags and she protests he asks, “[w]hy, what’s the matter? You’ll get dirty and you’ll tear your dress” (ibid. 52). His justification for attempting to do the work for her emphasizes physical aspects, causing Amunah to emphatically assure him that she will carry her bundles in an effort to prove she is a worker and not an appearance-obsessed female. After arriving at the *kvutzah*, another member notices her torn dress, irritating Amunah, who responds “wretchedly, ‘I’ve got other dresses’” (ibid. 53). While trying to establish a new life for herself as a worker, others still treat her as fragile due to her feminine appearance, making Amunah miserable.

To combat the inferior image the workers have created of her, Amunah overcompensates by trying to accomplish new tasks on her own, leading to a number of accidents and messes. The mistakes cause the workers to further snub her, and they begin to solely refer to her as a “girl.” When Amunah breaks a lamp while cleaning it, a worker reports “[t]he new girl’s already broken the glass” (ibid. 54). The use of “girl” unnecessarily emphasizes Amunah’s youth and gender and the epithet is disparaging, as no one in the *kvutzah* ever addresses her by her name. When Amunah is unable to cook or clean properly, she is told, “[y]ou’re not like a girl at all” (ibid. 55). While this might appear like a compliment, as Amunah would rather refrain from traditional women’s work and is upset when people focus on her femininity, she has only been allotted housework. Taking away the women’s aspect leaves Amunah with nothing, and thus the statement condemns Amunah as useless and incompetent. When Amunah is finally allowed to work in the fields, she returns to be greeted with further criticism: “Just a girl—like all the others [...] And all the kitchen work falls on me again,” states Hasidah, the only other woman at the *kvutzah* (ibid. 58). Through internal monologue Amunah contemplates, “What am I to deduce from it? Have I any right to stay on here? She calls me ‘little girl,’ but I want to be a worker”

(ibid. 58). While the contempt of the men saddens Amunah, the importance of the woman's opinion is emphasized because it is one of the few times Amunah's thoughts are made explicitly available to the reader. The woman's classification of Amunah as a "little girl" fills Amunah with such self-doubt that she contemplates leaving the *kvutzah*. The dichotomy between "little girl" and "worker" is one that Amunah fears she is unable to break, and now that she is seen as feminine, she can no longer hope to be a worker.

When the opportunity arises to leave the *kvutzah* and stay with her brother in Jerusalem, Amunah makes the decision to leave, as her wish of being a worker has remained unfulfilled due to the perceptions of the other members of the *kvutzah*. Too upset to tell her brother what happened, she writes to him, "[a] girl may marry and be happy even at seventeen, as my friend has done, but only a grownup person can be happy in a *kvutzah*" (ibid. 62). With the use of "girl" in her writing, Amunah acknowledges that the perception of the other members of the *kvutzah* limited her opportunity for success. She does not want to be the immature, feminine "girl" as she was perceived in the *kvutzah* but rather a gender-neutral "grownup person" who can pursue the work they want.

Brenner's choice of short story is unusual in respect to the genre of other writings from women of the Second Aliyah. Most of the available writings are in memoir form, which places distance between the authors and their experiences and also limits the presence of explicit details. While fiction decreases the factual validity of the specifics given, the fictionalization and contemporariness of Brenner's piece allows for the presence of dialogue within the writing, adding explicit evidence of how women were treated. Interestingly, though the narrative style allows authors to explore the inner thoughts of the characters, Amunah's narration is largely explanatory, and while she does reference her feelings, the only quoted thoughts involve her self-

doubts following Hasidah's reprimands. The distinctiveness of her self-reflection emphasizes not only Hasidah's effects on Amunah, but Hasidah's function as a character. Despite being a woman, Hasidah is skeptical of Amunah's ability to work, suggesting that the older woman, too, has adopted the men's disbelief of women's capabilities. Her expressed doubt of women's competency is harmful to Amunah, a younger woman attempting to find a more masculine place in the *kvutza*. Additionally, Hasidah herself does not work in the field, instead performing domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning, which are stereotypically attributed to women. By writing narrative fiction, Brenner both demonstrates men's suppression of women within the kibbutzim through the use of dialogue and the internalization of these doubts through character development and internal monologue.

In Experimental Fiction

While Brenner's short story is an unusual genre for an unpublished manuscript by a laywoman of the Second Aliyah, several Israeli female authors were publishing works of fiction that conveyed their dissatisfaction with the labor movement at the time Brenner wrote her story. Among such authors is Nehamah Pukhachewsky, whose anthologies were largely ignored by her contemporaries. While she immigrated to Palestine in 1899 and is considered a member of the First Aliyah, Pukhachewsky's stories, the first anthology of which was published in 1911, are largely condemning rebukes of the kibbutz life, inspired by events that transpired in her own village (Zierler). In many ways, her writings mirrored those of the women of the Second Aliyah, in part because she lived within the same social structure and was writing at the same time.

Pukhachewsky's most successful novella, "In Loneliness," was published in her later volume *In the Village and at Work* in 1930. "In Loneliness" is strikingly written as a series of diary entries by Zipporah Drori, a farmworker. Through the stream-of-consciousness of the diary

entries, Pukhachewsky presents a picture of a women whose freedom is constrained by the structure of the settlement. In one diary entry, Zipporah recounts a “general meeting” of the “leading figures of our settlement” (Pukhachewsky qtd. in Berlovitz 66). “Stimulated by the discussion” of a possible act of arson and the correct punishment for the crime, Zipporah writes down her name on a discussion list, but when it is her turn “they would not allow me to speak. Their reason was that I was only a guest at the meeting and not an official participant” (ibid. 67). Through the façade of a diary entry, blaming an anonymous, plural third-party may seem natural, as presumably the author would know who she was writing about and does not need to include names. However, Pukachewsky is not writing her own diary, and her reasons for Zipporah placing blame on the infamous “they” can be interpreted as a symbol of the systemic oppression of women by a force so widespread that it is impossible to contain it through names. “Their reason” further supports the idea of the repression of women being beyond control, as they explain rather bureaucratically that she is a “guest” as opposed to an “official participant,” despite being an active member of the settlement community.

Through the literary freedom allowed in diary form, Zipporah’s steam of consciousness following the settlers’ refusal to let her speak demonstrates that though caused by a systemic issue, individual acts of male dominance were interpreted as personal slights to the woman receiving them. Zipporah asks as series of rhetorical questions that portray the emotional effects of her rejection: “have I no status whatever in this group into which I force my way and demand the right to discuss its issues? Cannot a poor, wretched soul like me contribute anything to this ‘complicate mechanism’ that is the ‘settlement of our land?’” (ibid. 67) Despite how Zipporah “demand[ed] the right to discuss its issues,” the settlement structure suggests she has “no status” or rights as a member of the group. Indeed, she is not seen as an “official participant” of the

“complicate mechanism” of the kibbutz. The mechanical and bureaucratic terminology suggests there is no place for the emotional “poor, wretched soul” within the settlement, or any other female “soul like me.” Additionally, Zipporah’s choice to write these rhetorical questions in her personal diary as opposed to voicing them at the “general meeting” suggests the “general” male populace does not receive questions from women. Systemic, structural sexism within the settlements led to feelings of isolation among women, as they were treated similarly to unwelcome outsiders.

An interesting shift in Zipporah’s diary entry parallels the previously noted internalization by women of the male doubt in woman’s ability. Her cycle of rhetorical questions is interrupted with “Yet, on the other hand...” signaling a contrary shift as well as hesitation or rumination, as represented by the ellipses, which are unnecessary in a diary and purposely put in by its author to represent need for a pause (ibid. 67). After the clear signaling of a change in thought, the rhetorical questions continue; however, the tone of the passage has changed. Zipporah no longer writes with self-pity, instead asking, “a woman has no rights whatsoever, so by what authority does she push herself into the group to express her opinion?” (ibid. 67). Instead of holding the men accountable for viewing women as lesser, Zipporah acknowledges and accepts women’s lack of rights, and asks “by what authority” women can ask for equal representation if they do not have the right to be an “official participant” of the settlement. In this manner, Zipporah questions her own defiance of gender inequality. Zipporah not only critiques a woman’s right to equality, but she sets forth a series of exclamations that enforce stereotypes: “That is nothing but impudence on her part! A woman’s place is in the kitchen, behind the stove and not among the chosen delegates of the people!” (ibid. 67). Despite earlier requesting to speak to her fellow settlers and becoming angry when she is refused, Zipporah blames women for the

altercations, claiming women's fight for equality is "impuden[t]," referencing the stereotype of women performing domestic tasks, and accepting the false dichotomy that a woman can only be "in the kitchen, behind the stove" without also being "among the chosen delegates of the people." The switch in mentality is accompanied by a change to gendered language. While before Zipporah referred to "a poor, wretched soul," here her writings become explicitly about "a woman" and "a woman's place." Contextualizing the inequalities she experiences within the female framework allows Zipporah to excuse the male authority and subject herself to the notion that women are inferior.

By composing a fictionalized diary, Pukachewsky presents readers with a dramatic account of the sexism present in the New Yishuv. While the diary form leaves open the possibility of an unreliable narrator and fiction itself adds doubt to the validity of the stories of the male oppression of women, the stream of consciousness of the entries exposes the woman's feelings. Not only are the woman's anger and pain at the injustice evident, but the trajectory of her thought exposes how the internalized sexism phenomena manifests in an individual. Though events are only portrayed through the woman's eyes, giving little detail to setting and dialogue, the particulars that are present are those which affect the woman most and are contextualized by her emotions.

In the Collective Literature

Despite the limitations of individual genres, the collective works of female immigrants in Palestine at the turn of the 20th Century carry similar themes of depression and isolation because of systemic oppression. Additionally, the works provide evidence that women adopted the doubts men expressed regarding female capabilities, further fostering a hostile environment. Utilizing different genres, women are able to present different sides of the internalization process.

Through memoir, women are able to recollect their own experiences and provide factual basis for their claims, although as details from the past are difficult to reference, emotional integrity is difficult to prove. In contrast, fiction writers are able to explicitly describe the situations that made women feel inferior and provide insight into characters' emotional responses, but are unable to deliver a true account, instead providing a representation of the climate. By reading multiple works of different genres from the time period, a concrete image is built of the hostile environment, which led many women to doubt their own self-worth.

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