Outline of a Gender Conflict: Notes on an Early Story by Dvora Baron

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Abstract

This article examines Dvora Baron’s early story Zug mitkotet... (skitza) (A quarreling couple… [sketch]), about a young married couple drawn into a verbal and physical altercation. I propose that this early story already shows intimations of symbolism and complexity that characterize Baron’s later stories, as well as the first signs of the blurring and encoding of female protest that are characteristic of the second half of her work. Baron did this mainly by adapting the conventions of early twentieth-century male literature – private themes, short genres and fragmented language – and employing their meaning and purpose for female needs.

Introduction

Dvora Baron (1887-1956), a noted Russian-Israeli author, wrote over 80 short stories. She started writing during the Tkufa th’hiya (Hebrew Renaissance Period) which occurred during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Her works have been highly analyzed in respect of the fact that she was one of a minority of women writers in a poetic world almost totally dominated by men.

Baron’s works and life are generally considered to be divided into two major periods: early works (until the early 1920s, much of which Baron withheld from second publication) tending to focus on social themes and including somewhat blatant stories of women’s search for independence; and later works presenting the feminist angle more subtly, obscuring the feminist theme per se yet somewhat expanding it to include struggles of a more universal nature.

However, I propose that her early work was not as simplistic as commonly perceived and intend to prove in this article that her poetic complexity and restraint were perceptible even then. Indeed, I will attempt to show herein that one story written early in her career, Zug mitkotet... (skitza) (A quarreling couple… [sketch])², not only shows intimations of the universal symbolism and complexity in her writing style that is generally acknowledged as characteristic of Baron’s later stories, but demonstrates how, even at this young age, she hints at the female existential struggle, represented in her story on thematic, stylistic and generic levels. Indeed, I suggest that the quarrel so explicitly described in the story also implicitly symbolizes the fundamental poetic and ideological quarrel that engrossed Baron, a woman writer in a world of men.
Zug mitkotet was written in 1905, when Baron was only eighteen, and chronicles a violent incident in the marriage of a young couple. Much of the story’s merit is due to the way that Baron dauntlessly scrutinizes married life, shattering the romantic myth of marriage’s power of redemption. Yet, the quarreling couple in this story does not only represent the fundamental gender conflict; it also, I believe, symbolizes women’s struggle for emancipation from the repressive patriarchal discipline traditionally fostered on women. In addition, examining the story will allow us to appreciate of how Baron was able to create female prose within the conventions of early twentieth-century male-dominated literature by adopting, like other female literary contemporaries, short genres, private themes, and, sometimes, even fragmented language, all the while employing a sense and purpose for her own particular and subversive needs.

Early and Later Writings

As stated above, the stories written from the 1920s onwards are considered to be Baron’s important corpus, in which she obscures specific allusions to the feminist protest, expressing them subtly and thus leading scholars to endow upon her works a neutral, humanist-liberal interpretation. So, while “she was admired because she wrote with so much talent about the position and the situation of the woman,” she is also often presented as a writer who focused on more universal predicaments and whose interest lay predominantly in the recurring universal human-social questions. For example, a collection of essays devoted to her writings in the series P’ney ha-sifrut (Faces of literature, 1975), contains numerous critical and analytic studies written in this vein and that draw attention to her awareness of poverty, her sympathy for the innocent, and her considerations for the contrasts between dominance and submissiveness. In an extensive paper on Baron’s writings, Dan Miron offered considerable evidence for such a view, stating that her overwhelming vision was “the great, biological constancy of human existence per se.”

Regarding Baron’s early writings, it is interesting to note that she herself hid most of her literary creations from that time, refusing to publish them later and labeling them “trash” (in Hebrew, smartutim, literally, rags). In 1988, Nurit Govrin published Ha-makhatzit ha-rishona (The first half), a book dedicated to Baron’s early life and writings from 1888-1923. It was only then, when these early stories were collected, assembled, and presented to accompany Govrin’s enterprising study, that they finally got the chance to be...
acknowledged as part of Baron’s large corpus of complex, symbolic fiction, and that they became available for more detailed comparison with her later pieces. Govrin describes the process of Baron’s literary transition: from early, incipient stories to the fully developed tales written in the second half of her life, and to which most of her readers are familiar. According to Govrin, the transition is “from exposure to concealment, from the personal to the collective, from crass simplification to refined complexity.”

In contrast to the stories of her later works, her early stories seem to express feelings of deprivation, overt bitterness, and unbridled protest. “It seems,” wrote Govrin, “that in those first stories, Baron allowed herself to freely express the rebellion, fury, bitterness, and wild impulses hidden within her. Later on, she curbed, repressed, and hid these emotions to the point where none of her hidden passions and sentiments were allowed to emerge or encroach into her stories.”

What could have induced this change? Perhaps, as Lily Rattok suggests, at some point Baron realized that allowing her unfettered, explicit opinions free rein was an obstacle to being accepted as a serious author, so she suppressed them in her later works. Whatever the cause, scholars of Baron’s prose agree that “over the years, her taste and her art underwent a drastic change,” and her bifurcated biography affirms this observation. Her life was seemingly divided into considerably contrasting halves: one stormy and full of personal vicissitudes, the other uneventful and withdrawn; one whose artistic labors were buried and forgotten, the other full of achievements and appreciation.

The above illustrates the more accepted scholarly views on Baron’s corpus. However, the last fifteen years have introduced another line of critical analysis that suggests that the two periods of her life were actually not so different, nor can they be separated distinctly from each other. The first to suggest that there was a smaller, less absolute gap between Baron’s earlier and later works was Naomi Seidman, who offers the idea that Baron called her early stories smartutim in an ironic sense: the term “rags” implied leftover items and Baron deliberately chose her reality from smartut reality—the sort that was “left over” because her male colleagues considered it unsuitable for literary writing. Seidman claims that Baron followed this trend all through her literary career. In a later article on the two different versions of the story Genizah (Burial), Tova Cohen argued that while Baron apparently made a drastic transition “from overt feminism to complex and encoded feminism” during the second half of her writing career, she did not abandon her
early positions. Similarly, Sheila Jelen noted that Baron’s later stories enabled her to create a *midrashic* art, that is, an art which relates to and interprets her previous materials.

In any event, most of these studies mention Baron’s early works for the express purpose of relating them in some way to her later writings, the primary focus of investigation. In contrast, I focus on her early work to demonstrate that even at the beginning of her career, Baron’s stories were not as simplistic as most would have us believe and were already quite complex and filled with conflict. And while I, as others do, assume a continuing development and consummation between the two halves of Baron’s creativity, I contend that Baron’s feminism was, even at this early stage, much more overt and complex than initially appreciated. Certainly, the harsh over-simplicity of the early Baron (as described by Govrin) actually concealed considerable thematic and stylistic angst, and this can be appreciated by examining her early story *Zug mitkotet*, published by Baron in February 1905 in the daily newspaper *Ha-zman* (The Time) in Vilnius, White Russia.

A close reading of the text indicates the complexity of the female poetics within, poetics that are, in fact, no less complex and impressive than in her later stories. In particular, the story intriguingly reveals how Baron consciously studied and explored the writing themes and stylistic tools that were used by her male counterparts, adopting some and rejecting others. This correlates with contemporary research trends of Baron’s works that disclose how she apparently internalized the poetic principles imposed by the male hegemony, frequently subverting them and inverting their meanings.

The couple quarrelling in the story is metonymic of the fundamental, eternal conflicts that the story actually expresses: on one hand, an intrinsic conflict about the status and identity of women in the Jewish society of that period, and on the other, the extrinsic poetic conflict of a woman writer grappling with the codes of male-dominated writing. The rest of this article is concerned with outlining the internal-thematic conflict vs. the external-poetic one.

### The Internal-thematic Conflict
Dvora Baron began writing during the *Tkufat ha’thiya* at the end of the *Haskalah* (Hebrew Enlightenment). While one attribute of the *Haskalah* was its seemingly progressive attitudes to women’s education, in actuality, the *maskilim* themselves still continued to
encourage women’s traditional roles as wife and mother and did not consider self-realization a reason for a woman’s education.\(^{16}\) Thus, a woman writer at the time had to deal with significant questions pertaining to personal and social identity, especially in the case of Baron, a young woman of only seventeen, who had just left her parents’ home, and was taking her first steps within a patriarchal literary system.

Against this background, \textit{Zug mikotet} has a particularly symbolic function. Through it, Baron takes a deep look at the inner core of married life, shattering the romantic myth of marriage’s power of self-fulfillment.\(^{17}\) As she recounts the routine, intimate details of a married couple’s life, she exposes the mechanisms of oppression, deprivation, and discrimination that are hidden deep within, behind closed doors, in those private spaces where the woman is secluded.\(^{18}\) She weaves a connection between male sexuality and the oppression and exploitation of women, as she tackles the humiliation and violence that husbands often foist on their wives.

In the lengthy (almost a third of the story) exposition, the reader meets Sonia as she is brooding over her marriage and her uncouth husband, whose behavior towards her changes according to whether it is a time, based on Jewish ritual law, that her body is permitted to him. During the two weeks in which sexual intercourse is permitted, Yacob treats her gently, but for the two weeks when she is forbidden to him, he humiliates and beats her. In the story’s opening scene, Sonia is combing her long black hair, gazing out of a window even while she is observing the paleness of her face in a mirror. Sonia reminds herself that her “time of month” is approaching and she is worried lest her pale face give her away. As the exposition ends, her fears are indeed founded: Yacob comes home for lunch and realizes her situation. He then begins his taunting, which quickly deteriorates into mutual verbal abuse and humiliation.

Up to this point the narrative is yet another link in the long chain of subjugation that Sonia had described in the exposition. However, at this point, Sonia’s reaction is unique: she loses her patience and in a fit of rage, she not only launches a fierce verbal attack against her husband, but grabs dishes off the lunch table and throws them at him. Here the story ends, except for a brief epilogue in which two old women sitting on a bench outside Yacob and Sonia’s house react to the altercation they hear with: “It’s nothing, […] just a quarreling couple …” (p. 376).
Initially, this short story seems to provide evidence that Baron’s early stories feature “direct description, full of vigorous effects,” so much so in fact that, as Govrin noted, Isaiah Bershadsky, editor of Ha-zman’s literary section at the time, believed the story was actually written by a mature and experienced woman describing a living reality with which she was intimately familiar. This can be seen by the following brief conversation that Moshe Ben-Eliezer, Baron’s fiancé at the time, held with Bershadsky about the story (as described by Ben-Eliezer):

“Did you by any chance become acquainted with Dvora Baron in Kovna?” [asked Bershadsky].
“Yes.”
“And what is she? She certainly can’t be young any more.”
“No, she is a young woman.”
“That’s impossible. If that were the case, she would not have been able to write the feuilleton. At any rate, she certainly cannot be a virgin….”
I was a bit insulted. I said:
“Her appearance reveals nothing about that.”
Mr. B. smirked and replied:
“That’s a sign that you don’t know anything about women.”

However, the physical struggle described at the end of the story, can, in effect, represent an interpretive struggle concerning the protagonist’s female identity and her definition of autonomy. This struggle really has begun in the story’s opening scene, in which Sonia is combing her hair while sadly reflecting on the violent and brutal relationship that is her marriage. While combing her hair, her gaze is darting back and forth — now into the mirror, now out of the window: “She placed the small mirror near the window […]. Sonia loosened her long hair behind her, and while she combed it with one hand she slightly drew back the shade with the other and stared at the two old women sitting on the low bench in front of the window, knitting stockings. After she had combed her hair well, she began looking into the mirror” (p. 374). This offers an interesting duality, for while gazing into a mirror is a stereotypically female act, the outward gaze can be considered a traditionally male act. For Baron, however, both of these gazes are complex, each with a dual significance, and Baron uses the seemingly stereotypical gaze in the mirror to criticize masculine power.
Sonia looks into the mirror and tries to understand how her husband sees her. She can see only two of her features, her hair and her face, and through these she identifies herself as a victim of prolonged male objectification: her remaining black tresses are quickly braided and fastened into a coil, while her face is pale and bruised. In a sense, Sonia’s act of looking at herself in the mirror is equal to the discovery of “self” that the mirror enables, and then—similar to the mirror stage described by psychologist Jacques Lacan—she develops an ambivalent attitude that is a mixture of identification and alienation.

Still trying to fathom her husband’s ways, Sonia paraphrases a Talmudic saying that includes an attractive wife among those things that a satisfied man is said to possess. Yet she asks: “Anyone else would have been completely satisfied. After all, what does he lack? A nice home, beautiful furniture, the floor always ‘shiny’… […] does he hate me?” (pp. 374-375). Since Baron had received a Talmudic education at her parents’ home, she might well have been familiar with this saying. Thus the absence of the “attractive wife” from the allusion has a dual meaning: it demonstrates a defective self-image while it alludes to the beginning of female rebellion. And furthermore, taking typically male literary devices and then subtly rebelling against them is Baron's modus operandi at several levels of the text, as we shall see below.

As noted above, Sonia’s inward and personal gaze into the mirror is accompanied by an outward gaze through the window, symbolic of her longing to reach out beyond her immediate environment. But her attempt to be able to significantly observe the expanse outside is immediately hindered by her gaze alighting, out of the innumerable details that were certainly visible outside her window, on two old ladies knitting stockings—and Sonia sadly realizes that she is looking at herself in the future.

This fact is significant as it differentiates Sonia from another “gazing” heroine that Baron writes about later: Musha, in the story Derekh kotsim (The thorny path, 1943). In the story, Musha, an invalid and a bereaved mother, is paralyzed, But Baron has given her an alternative ability, the ability to observe. From her bed by the window, Musha looks out onto the busy street and creates stories in her imagination of emotionally rich lives. Orly Lubin, in her interpretation of Dereck kotsim, explains that Musha’s power of observation is a tool that she uses for dominance and control, and shows the close association between
observation and interpretation. Lubin bases her claim on two assumptions: first, both in Western philosophy and in psychoanalysis, “seeing” plays a special role in everything concerned with acquiring knowledge, understanding, and control. Second, the “act of seeing” has culturally defined the woman as an incomplete version of the man and turned her into an object of the male gaze. Lubin therefore contends that Baron’s conflict over “the look” constitutes the essence of the woman’s situation in the world. Musha’s dramatic loss is a fact, but her outward vision compensates her with meaning and creativity. On the other hand, when Sonia looks beyond her window, she does not gain anything more than what is reflected from her mirror: oppressed womanhood. Thus the claim by film theoretician, Ann Kaplan, that even when women receive the right, so to speak, to look outwards and to expand their horizons, they have not necessarily had conferred upon them the ability to act or control.

The knitting women at whom Sonia looks add another dimension to the matter of female oppression. They pick up the echoes of the domestic quarrel, dismissing her pain and her private anguish with the words: “It’s nothing, […] just a quarreling couple …” (p. 376). This dismissal merges in the reader’s mind with Sonia’s difficulty in understanding the reason for her husband’s behavior (“What does he lack?” “Does he hate me?”). We thus appreciate that the reason for Sonia’s situation lies in the intrinsic structure of the male-female relationship: the tradition of oppression and control exists to preserve and perpetuate that oppression and control. In this context, the knitting women represent the continuation of the status quo, where men continue to oppress their women, and the women, without any alternative, comply and pass their helpless acquiescence on to their daughters. Therefore, the knitting becomes a symbol of female folklore—essentially a tradition of self-oppression.

One of the story’s main functions is exposing those possessive structures that ostensibly are there to protect women but in fact betray them. By this, Baron refutes the age-old myth of married life as a “happily-ever-after” fairy tale. While Yacob believes in this myth and therefore pictures himself as a savior, Sonia, on the other hand, refuses to consider herself as having been saved, as we can understand from this passage:

“...ungrateful … she was naked… barefoot… I took her… I stood her on her feet, and now she finds it hard to be ‘m-i-s-t-r-e-s-s of the house’…”

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Sonia’s face reddened more and more; she was choked with tears. And your father, they also know… Who was he?… Huh?… It’s known… known… everything is known…
I’ve heard this “tune” before m-a-n-y t-i-m-e-s…[Sonia replies].
Tears began to flow from Sonia’s eyes.
Ho, ho, ho... ah, ah! See here! … My little creature… Did you hear? You’ll hear yet…You’ll hear yet!… I knew, I knew your father… huh.”
Sonia was unable to restrain herself any more.” (p. 376).

From this, we can understand Yacob’s grasp of the accepted agreement of give-and-take between husband and wife: in return for his financial support and social status, she is to provide him with domestic and sexual services.30

Ironically, Yacob’s account of this naked girl whom he has ostensibly taken under his protection alludes to the naked baby girl wallowing in her blood that God takes under his protection in the biblical Book of Ezekiel.31 Has Yacob not taken the naked Sonia and “stood her on her feet,” just as God spread his wings over the naked toddler in the Bible? Yet, the irony is obvious. In the Bible, God spreads his protection over the child wallowing in her blood; in this story, Yacob is raging at Sonia who is (apparently) wallowing in her menstrual blood (which prevents him from sexual access to her) and thereby is breaking, to his infuriation, their “contract.”

Another inference that can be drawn from the passage above regards Sonia’s anger at his mention of her parents’ home, which represents to her the unjust social mechanism and distorted social order that caused Sonia’s parents to “abandon” her and hand her over to her husband as if she were an object.

In an attempt to break away from the role of passive heroine, whose happiness stands in direct proportion to her submission and obedience,32 Sonia becomes active, behaving violently toward her husband. However, a physical attack is not necessarily evidence of strength and power; it can also be a sign of weakness and frustration. And Sonia’s frustration is two-fold: her frustration at being subject to the rules of patriarchal domination (leading her to undertake a violent “male” reaction), and her frustration arising from her feeling that merely observing and interpreting life around her does not provide her with sufficient power and authority.
To emphasize this point, the text specifically mentions Yacob’s gaze as a gaze that is penetrating and objectifying. At first he “continued to look at her hair,” but then “he began to look at the overgrown fingernail on his kotno (little finger).” Then, “he continued to stare at his fingernail,” until finally “he looked at Sonia’s face” (p. 375). Incidentally, as he gazes at her he speaks to her for the first time, asking “So? Shall we eat, my doll?” (Ibid). Note that Yacob looks at the very two body parts that Sonia observed in the opening scene and which, for Sonia, represent the price of her enslavement and oppression: her hair and her face. However, most of Yacob’s time is spent gazing intensely at his fingernail. The use of the word kotno might allude to the Halachic prohibition against deriving enjoyment from gazing even at a woman’s little finger (kotna in Hebrew), At the same time, it presents Yacob as a brutal narcissist who is obsessively preoccupied with his own needs, as Baron hints that Sonia’s bruises interest him “less than the fingernail on his little finger” (as literally translated from a Hebrew expression).

At the same time that the narrator is pointing out Yacob’s uncouthness, she is also portraying Sonia’s weakness. She describes Yacob’s and Sonia’s behaviors and reactions in detailed metonymic language. Jacob “passed his ring-laden hand over Sonia’s head,” “passed his rough hand over his curls,” and even “crossed his arms on his chest, drew himself upright and pushed out his belly” (pp. 375, 376). Sonia, on the other hand, “bit her lower lip,” “her lips paled and trembled,” and her words “quavered and ceased” (Ibid). The violent physical outburst is preceded with this initial struggle between Sonia and Yacob, portrayed as a fight between rough hands and trembling lips. Baron’s purpose, however, is not simply to emphasize the difference in power between the two parties and make Sonia’s a priori weakness a justification for her violence. By focusing on Sonia’s lips and voice (or absence, thereof: “Sonia was silent,” “Sonia did not answer”), Baron underscores the limitations and inhibitions of female expression.

The External-poetic Conflict
In her article “Baron ‘in the Closet,’” Naomi Seidman describes Baron’s writing as that of someone who developed “in a closet” metaphorically: that is, one who spent many meaningful and significant moments of her youth sitting alone behind a partition in the home of her rabbi father, listening to the lessons that he gave to groups of boys. Even though the male world was open to Baron intellectually, she was still prohibited from...
physically entering it. In other words, it was a world that accepted her intellectual presence as she occasionally asked a pertinent question from behind the partition, but was closed to her body and her sexuality. This architectural mapping is perceived by Seidman as a brilliant metaphor for Baron’s dual identity as a writer who is both an insider and an outsider to the Hebrew literary tradition.\(^{35}\) Ostensibly, Baron seems to be attached to the old ways of the small Jewish \textit{shtetl}, writing within a fenced-off, separate, protected, poetic territory, deliberately non-current and deliberately non-male (both style and content). In fact, however, there is no question that her writing is “boundary-crossing narrative fiction,” as defined by Wendy Zierler,\(^{36}\) encompassing complex dual poetics. Baron’s viewpoint, easily misinterpreted from the restrained tone of her writing, was not calm and balanced but tense and complex – a position that would, in later years, levy a considerable emotional toll on her.

With this complexity in mind, we can analyze Baron’s descriptions of those private and isolated spaces in which women were traditionally considered the property of their fathers or husbands, and where no laws existed to protect these women from male violence. It is especially worth noting that Baron’s exploration of these issues and places occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century under the auspices and cover of a thematic and conceptual change that characterized the renascent Hebrew literature in general. I refer to the \textit{haktanat ha-shekef} (reduction of perspective), to use Shimon Halkin’s formulation,\(^{37}\) which demanded and promoted the literary representation of complex, intimate private worlds, helped to improve the descriptive tools available to writers in that period, and wrought the first expressions of psychological realism. This early-twentieth-century literary trend possessed both private and collective facets simultaneously. For example, the \textit{talush}—uprooted character—that was prominent in renascent Hebrew literature possessed both private and collective facets and became a complex symbol of this generation.\(^{38}\) It represented a spiritual world full of ideological contradictions and perplexities, and a world where the young people of those times found themselves drifting in turmoil between the old one they had left and a new world in which they were painstakingly trying to establish roots. However, according to Sheila Jelen, “the uprooted was irremediably gendered” and in the literature of the times it was rare to find such characters who were women. The
miserable woman was simply *just* miserable, without representing, like the uprooted man did, a predicament of her generation.\(^{39}\)

It is in this context that I claim that Baron acted within the legitimate framework of “perspective reduction,” but diverted this trend by representing a female world bothered by entirely different questions to those central and familiar to her generation. Sonia is a woman who suffers from male sexual harassment, and her story is not a private one-time thing but the fundamental story of women’s status in Jewish society. Critics, however, have tended to ignore the possibility that the heroine’s experiences are symbolic of fundamental communal questions. Dan Miron, for example, argued that the figure of “the new Hebrew young woman” (in works by male authors) did not possess within them “the nation’s sorrow” and basic cultural and spiritual issues the way that the figure of the “Hebrew young man” did. He contends that even in Baron’s stories the heroine’s experiences are not metonymic of the state of the nation’s soul; at most they contain a sociological representativeness.\(^{40}\)

Miron is certainly correct in his statement that Baron’s works depict “social representativeness.” We can see this kind of representation, for example, in the roster of daily chores performed by Sonia, evoking the famous opening sentence “Hebrew woman, who knows your life?” from Y.L. Gordon’s poem *Kotzo Shel Yud*. To this effect, Baron writes: “Well, I’ve already been to the butcher’s. I bought meat, salted, cooked, purified, and washed everything” (p. 374). However, could not this minor, trivial realism of washing and purification, which constitutes the specific source of tension between Sonia and her husband, in fact be conceived as a metonym for the very serious issue of the laws of ritual purity as a whole? And, projecting further, are these ritual laws not both a mechanism for (internal) social organization and control, as well as for (external) definition of national identity (vis-à-vis other societies)?

It can hardly be accidental that in a later story by Baron, *Derekh kotsim* (mentioned above), the issue of Musha’s ritual purity is raised. Musha, the invalid heroine, cannot immerse herself in the ritual bath as required by religious law. Thus, when her son, Benjamin, is born, the congregation, perceiving him as having been born in sin, boycotts his circumcision ceremony. Here, Baron raises the issue of the Jewish collective’s ethical priorities and the threat to its identity that is posed by Musha. An important point to note in
this connection is that the Halachic laws concerning menstruation are the sole responsibility of the woman; performing or ignoring the required acts gives her considerable power and responsibility in the community.

In addition to Baron’s unique manipulation of thematic changes in “reduction of perspective,” she also chose a genre and employed various linguistic means to produce a literary work that teaches about conflicting motives and needs, and material worlds quarreling among themselves. For example, in her early works, Baron was influenced by the realistic and naturalistic poetics of the Ha-mahalakh ha-hadash (New Move) group, which prompted her to give many of her stories subtitles of a distinctly documentary flavor, using words such as “report,” “memoir,” and “picture.” In the case of Zug mitkotet, the subtitle is skitza (Baron borrowed the term from the German Skizze). Hamutal Bar-Yosef, who studied the characteristics of the reshima (sketch) genre and its subtypes in Hebrew literature, indicates their Russian roots, and explains that in Russian literature this genre was used to increase the tension between reliability and documentation on the one hand, and the stylized representation of intimate states of mind on the other. In renascent Hebrew literature, the adoption of this sketch genre from Russian literature answered two needs: First, the documentary form of a report conformed to the relevance that reality demanded of literature. In other words, the literature could comply with the norm that “national ethical responsibility,” as discussed by Avner Holtzman, demanded of intellectuals. Second, writers were able to fill the form with modernistic content and move away from the politically engaged literature that the framework of this genre aroused and expected.

Yet another element of naturalism that can be ascribed to the influence of Ha-mahalakh ha-hadash can be recognized in Baron’s fragmented linguistic style, with its numerous punctuation marks and syntactic breaks, reflecting a stuttering, hesitant, broken language. All of these characteristics are consistent with the conventions of Hebrew literary writings at the beginning of the twentieth century. The broken syntax and the numerous punctuation marks in Baron’s early writings, even to the ellipses she added to the title of this story, were similar to Brenner’s rhetoric of frankness, while also providing an authentic representation of her difficulty, as a woman writer, to fluently describe both patriarchal oppression and the rebellion against it.
We can thus ascribe a dual motive to Baron’s choice of the sketch genre and style. First, the sketch enabled her, as it did her male colleagues, to represent a plethora of realistic intimate, private, and social materials to create an objective, scientific, documentary impression. Baron, however, exploited the structure of this modern journalistic-style genre to tell the story of a private, abandoned, and forgotten abused woman.44 To borrow a term coined by the American poet and researcher, Alicia Ostriker, who contends that women have always been forced to “steal the language” to rewrite the masculine collective mythology,45 we can say that Baron “stole the genre” to exploit its unique characteristics for subversive purposes. To put it somewhat extremely, Baron deconstructed the sketch in order to reconstruct it as a genre empathetic towards the female experience.

Wendy Zierler uses Ostriker’s metaphor in her book And Rachel Stole the Idols in which she describes the evolution of women’s writing in Hebrew literature. Zierler identifies Rachel’s theft of her father Laban’s teraphim (idols, in Genesis 31) as a subversive act intended to undermine “the manner in which patriarchy defines the woman, restricts her movement, and excludes her from all positions of power within the culture.”46 Referring to Ostriker, Zierler argues that stealing the teraphim can be equated to stealing language, in the sense of appropriating traditional male assets into the female’s sphere. In her book, she shows the various techniques that Modern Hebrew women writers used in order “to steal (into) the literary language.” She notes that this was a conscious attempt “to create works of literature that represented the unique, women’s perspective on many time-honored themes and communal issues,” leading to the identification of women writers as border-crossers or “immigrants” in the literary sense. While Zierler’s book teaches us that Baron was not the only woman writer to do so,47 Baron was undoubtedly one of the first, and the only woman prose writer who was accepted as canonical in the early twentieth century.

Regarding Baron’s use of “male” literary norms and her subversion there under, it is important to note her interesting use of the pseudonym, “Prophetess.” Pseudonyms were traditionally used in Hebrew writing at that time, which, naturally, was generally produced by men, and the pseudonyms were used for varied purposes, both poetic and ideological.48 Nurit Govrin points out that by means of this epithet, Baron informed her readers that a

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woman had written the story, even hinting at that woman’s first name – the prophetess Dvora (Deborah).\textsuperscript{49} However, whereas the specific appellation chosen by Baron—then only seventeen years old—implies an authoritative and even subversive self-assurance, her concealed use of a pseudonym attests to her hesitation and fear of exposing herself, and thus to the partial obliteration of her standing as a social critic. This ambivalent signature can thus be considered yet another symptom of the struggle that the story represents: the struggle for female expression and the ability to tell a story from a woman’s viewpoint, against the background of women’s continuing and conscious dependence on masculine thought and action.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In this article I have presented the young Dvora Baron, who, in 1905, was taking her first steps in the Hebrew literary system. She wrote her early stories through a double prism, each facet reflecting a different aspect of her style: \textit{one} as a writer of her time, influenced by the contemporary norms of writing that she toiled so hard to master; \textit{the other} as a woman-writer, revealing herself in her stories, and describing the fragile world of the Jewish woman. The quarrel in \textit{Zug mitkotet} can be correctly examined as a metonym of the wider principle of quarreling and conflict, and which is reflected on thematic, stylistic, and generic levels. This quarrelling, in essence, is symbolic of Dvora Baron’s internal continuing writing struggle, her “quarrel” between her dependence on male models and traditional writing, and her concomitant subversive aspiration of these.

Sonia is Baron’s tangible representation. Sonia’s struggle with her powerful husband represent Baron’s struggle of principals in the literary world: principals of value and identity. Sonia strives for her rights to gaze (in the mirror and out the window), to express herself, and to interpret her experiences on her own. Baron, similarly, strives for her rights to observe (within and without), to express \textit{herself}, and to express her experiences independently as a woman writer. Sonia struggles against her husband by using the very devices that he uses; Baron copes with her male-dominated surroundings by using those devices that the male authors of her era used, adapting them for her own, individual needs.

The dual qualities of Baron’s works charmed, but also sometimes annoyed, many scholars of her work. This is the reason for the often conflicting and unique descriptions of
her prose. Ben-Ami Feingold, for example, noted that Baron was a feminist writer but “she should not in any way be considered a politically engaged writer, a feminist in the ideological sense.”50 Sheila Jelen and Shachar Pinsker also contended that Baron did write in the same way as her male contemporaries, since otherwise she could not have written at all; yet, in the very same breath they contend that she did not write like them at all.51 After studying the story Zug mitkotet, it seems clear that this dual quality is also characteristic of her earlier work. Therefore, Baron’s writings should not be defined constantly and systematically as “early” or “late.” Instead, her corpus can be seen as a continuous process in which the early works form the basis for concealing the complicated, poetic, female subversion that occurs later, and that the developing characteristics of her later work have roots that can already be found even at the beginning of her literary career.

Notes:

1 Dvora Baron was born on December 4, 1887, in the town of Ouzda in White Russia (Belarus) and died on August 20, 1956, in Tel Aviv.
2 Hereinafter referred to as Zug mitkotet.
3 Pagis, Dvora Baron, 9; see also: Feingold, “Dvora Baron as a Feminist Author,” 323-351.
4 See, for example: Fishel Lachover, Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar and Yaakov Fichman in Pagis, Dvora Baron, 28, 36, 55.
7 Ibid., 128.
9 Pagis, Dvora Baron, 20.
10 Govrin, The First Half, 11-17.
11 Seidman, “Baron ‘in the Closet’: An Epistemology of the Women’s Section,” in A Marriage Made in Heaven, 92. Furthermore, Seidman applies the commonly used distinction between Baron’s early and later fiction synchronically and compares her early stories in Hebrew to those she wrote in Yiddish at the same time. Seidman suggests that such a comparison reveals the reserved, intellectual character of Baron’s early Hebrew stories, so different from their radical Yiddish counterparts (ibid., 92-101).
13 Jelen, Intimations of Difference, 118-120. For more on this issue see Jelen and Pinsker, Hebrew, Gender, and Modernity, 7-8.
14 Dvora Baron, “Zug mitkotet”, Ha-zman (The Time) 3, no.24 (13.2.1905): 2 (Hebrew). The story was signed: A prophetess. The author was identified through the diary of Moshe Ben-Eliezer, Baron’s fiancé at the time (1904-1909). See: Govrin, The First Half, 44-69.
15 For example: Zierler, “Exile and community in the fiction of Devorah Baron,” in And Rachel Stole The Idols, 228-250; Pinsker, “Unraveling the Yarn,” 244-279; Jelen, Intimations of Difference.
16 See on this issue: Carol B. Balin and Wendy I. Zierler, “Epilogue: the Life and Work of Hava Shapiro (1878-1943),” in Shapiro, In My Entering Now, 501-541. The authors draw the reader’s attention to the similarities between Hava Shapiro’s education in her parents’ home and the education, which Baron received.
Outline of a Gender Conflict: Notes on an Early Story by Dvora Baron

18 “Because we lived in such great intimacy with our oppressors, isolated from each other, we were prevented from seeing our personal suffering as a political situation. This gave rise to the illusion that the relationship between a wife and her spouse was an interrelationship between two private individuals, which can be resolved individually. But as a matter of fact any such relationship is a class relationship, and the private conflicts between men and women are political conflicts which can only be resolved collectively.” See “The Redstockings Manifesto,” in Baum et al., Learning Feminism, 62-68.

19 Pagis, Dvora Baron, 19.


21 All the following page numbers in parentheses within the text are taken from: Baron, “Zug mitkotet,” 374-376.

22 On the objectification and eroticization of the male gaze, see Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 57-68.

23 Sonia’s act of combing her hair generates questions of female identity. It could be an allusion to the sublime figure of Heine’s Lorelei, who combs her golden hair on the heights above the Rhein; or to Rachel, the hero of Bialik’s poem “She Sits by the Window,” who combs her hair in the same place. Bialik’s poem was published in 1910, five years after Zug mitkotet, but it is an adaption of a Yiddish folksong, which Baron may have had in mind when she wrote her story (Shamir, “She Sits by the Window,” 16-17). Was it a coincidence that in his poem Bialik seemed to answer Baron, Bershadsky and the story’s readers: “In your eyes she is wanton, but in my eyes she is innocent”? (My emphasis, EBE).


25 “Three things make a man content; these are an attractive home, an attractive wife, and attractive household articles.” (Tr. Berakhot, 57b).

26 In the field of philosophy, one can point to Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” as an example that connects between vision and control, knowledge and the attaining of truth; whereas in psychoanalysis, Freud established a link between awareness and vision, and between sexual identity and vision. See: Plato, “The Republic,” 546-550; Irigaray, “Another ‘cause’—Castration,” in Speculum of the Other Woman, 46-55; Jay, Downcast Eyes.

27 Lubin, A Woman Reads a Woman, 146-148, 156-159.


29 In a similar context, Seidman claims that “‘feminist’ or ‘misogynist’ discourses in Baron cannot be simply identified with male and female characters.” See: Seidman, “Baron ‘in the Closet’: An Epistemology of the Women’s Section,” in A Marriage Made in Heaven, 79.

30 See in this context: Kate Millet, “A Theory of Sexual Politics,” in Baum et al., Learning Feminism, 79.

31 “And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare” (Ezekiel 16: 6-7).


33 For a useful summary of the theory of how females and males look at things and on the difference between the common look and the penetrating male gaze, see: Evans and Gamman, “The gaze revisited,” 12-61.

34 As it is said: “He who looks even upon the little finger of a woman, it is as if he has looked upon the most intimate place” (Tr. Berakhot, 24a).

35 Seidman, “Baron ‘in the Closet’: An Epistemology of the Women’s Section,” in A Marriage Made in Heaven, 67-101. Seidman points out that this double identity also arises from the fact that she is a “bilingual writer in a militantly monolingual environment, as a chronicler of the Diaspora at the heart of Zionist activism, as a modernist whose experimentation took directions [...] cannot be entirely explained by the prejudices of her literary environment” (ibid., 72).

36 Zierler, “Exile and community in the fiction of Devorah Baron,” in And Rachel Stole The Idols, 231

37 Halkin, “Reduction of Perspective,” in Conventions and Crises in Our Literature, 72-77.

38 For example: Michael, the hero in Berdichevsky’s novella Mahanayim (Between two camps); Dr. Vinik, in Berkowitz’s story Talush (The uprooted); and Uriel Efрат, the main character in Gnessin’s novella Beterem (Before).
Outline of a Gender Conflict: Notes on an Early Story by Dvora Baron

39 Jelen, *Intimations of Difference*, 1-2, 13-14. Jelen also speaks about the representation of female voices and experiences, mentioning that in Jewish custom, women’s prayers are performed only on an individual basis. Women’s writing is similarly perceived as lacking a broader collective symbolism (ibid., 130-131).

40 Miron, *Founding Mothers, Step Sisters*, 68.

41 Gilboa, “Dvora Baron: From the ‘New Move’ to the Outside,” in *From Naturalism to Realism*, 49-64.


44 Carol Balin and Wendy Zierler describe Hava Shapiro’s narrative fiction in a similar vein. Shapiro, too, turned to the short genres, particularly to the report, as did many of her generation, and she too employed in this genre a poetic duality and symbolism. See: Balin and Zierler, “Epilogue: the Life and Work of Hava Shapiro,” in Shapiro, *In My Entering Now*, 524-534.

45 Ostriker, “Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythology,” in *Stealing the Language*, 210-238.

46 Zierler, “Exile and community in the fiction of Devorah Baron,” in *And Rachel Stole The Idols*, 1-7, 13; See also: Jelen, *Intimations of Difference*, 98.

47 Among other prose writers treated by Zierler at length are Sarah Feige Meinkin Foner and Hava Shapiro; see: Zierler, “Exile and community in the fiction of Devorah Baron,” in *And Rachel Stole The Idols*, Ch. 5.

48 Nurit Govrin dedicated a short article to this phenomenon, in which she points out that from the tens of examples of pseudonyms adopted by male writers since the *Haskalah* Literature, only six women authors occasionally used pseudonyms, among them, Baron using “Prophetess.” See: Govrin, “Masked Names,” 419-423.

49 Govrin, *The First Half*, 146. In this respect, too, Baron shows a similarity to her contemporary Hava Shapiro, who published her compositions under the pseudonym “Mother of All Creatures.” On the inferred meanings that this choice of epithet entails see: Balin and Zierler, “Epilogue: the Life and Work of Hava Shapiro,” in Shapiro, *In My Entering Now*, 528.

50 Feingold, “Dvora Baron as a Feminist Author,” 348.


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