

# THE SLEEPY WIFE: A FEMINIST CONSIDERATION OF A. B. YEHOSHUA'S FICTION

by

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In the following exploration of the image of the sleepy wife in A. B. Yehoshua's fiction, I would like to highlight a largely neglected aspect in the critical work on Yehoshua and, for that matter, on modern Hebrew literature in general. This aspect involves the androcentric perspective underlying the literary characterization of men, women and their relationships. Although the issue has received considerable attention in literary theory and criticism in the West, no study of this kind has yet been undertaken in Hebrew literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> As critical works on a variety of national literatures indicate, androcentrism has dominated the literary scene throughout recorded history.<sup>2</sup> What differs from one generation to another, and from one author to another, is mostly related to the extent and specific expression of the male centered perspective. This exploratory study does not argue that Yehoshua's female characterizations are singularly, or even consciously, sexist; rather, it suggests that Yehoshua's work is not exempt from the impact of androcentric thinking, and that this thinking has a considerable impact on female as well as male characterization in his work.<sup>3</sup>

1. Androcentric characterizations of women constitute only one aspect of feminist theory and criticism, which is interested, among other things, in the status of female writers, the influence of male centered criticism on the formation of the literary canon, the impact of androcentrism on the literary expression of female authors, and the impact of androcentrism on the valuation of certain themes and literary conventions. It is impossible to list even the most important of the studies produced to date on feminist literary theory. The uninitiated reader would do well to consult the following studies in order to better understand the goals and practices of the present article, and of feminist literary criticism in general: Virginia Woolf (1957); Mary Ellman (1968); Josephine Donovan (1975); Judith Fetterley (1977); Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet (1983).

2. See for example, H. R. Hays (1964). See also K. Rogers (1966).

3. Although the terms "androcentric" and "sexist" are closely interrelated, the former is used in this work to designate the perception of man as central and superior, while the

As one of the leading figures of the Generation of the State, A. B. Yehoshua (b. 1936), sought to break away from the literary and ideological norms of the Palmah Generation which predominated in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Since the publication of his first collection of short stories, *The Death of the Old Man* (1963), Yehoshua's irony, symbolism and absurdist plots have marked his writing as a dramatic break with the solemn moralism and socialist realism of his predecessors (Shaked, 1974, pp. 125-148). Yehoshua's comic-pathetic protagonist, whose actions are grotesque distortions of what is commonly defined as normal, rational and moral, differs markedly from the Palmah hero of his predecessors (Sadan-Loebenstein, 1981, pp. 23-41). Yet like the Palmah hero of Yizhar Smilansky, Moshe Shamir, Aharon Megged, Benjamin Tammuz and Hanoch Bartov, Yehoshua's hero too is male.<sup>4</sup> Whether, as is commonly held, the protagonist's neurotic and self-defeating behavior reflects the beleaguered existence and consciousness of Israel (Sadan-Loebenstein, 1981, pp. 31-36; Gertz, 1983, pp. 177-209; Oren, 1983, pp. 27-40; 109-126), or whether it alludes to the existential malaise of modern society in general, the center of Yehoshua's narrative is occupied by a male hero. Although Yehoshua claimed in a 1976 interview that female characters "scare him less and less" (Peri and Kalderon, 1976, p. 288), which may be confirmed by the increasing presence of female characters in his latest novels, women continue to function in his works as auxiliary characters. For the most part, they are extensions of a world gone awry, a world from which the male protagonist attempts to flee. To use Amos Oz's description of Yehoshua's secondary characters in his early work, women are the walls against which the protagonist beats his head again and again (p. 271).

The most distinctive characteristic of Yehoshua's wife figures is their inaccessibility. They seem to be physically present, but mentally absent. They are blank. In this respect they differ only slightly from Yehoshua's diaphanous girls, on the one hand, and his old hags on the other. The girl's blankness appears to derive from her elusiveness, her physical unreachability (e.g., Galia in "Galia's Wedding"; Haya in "Three Days and a Child"; Ziva in "The Evening Journey of Yatir"). Yehoshua's wife differs from the unreachable and chimeric girl mainly due to her

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latter refers to the attitude that justifies and promotes discrimination against and mistreatment of women.

4. A detailed analysis of the characterization of women in the Palmah Literature is included in my forthcoming book, *Sex, Ideology and Fiction: The Representation of Women in Israeli Literature 1948-1980*.

proverbial unattractiveness to the male protagonist, or to her own indifference to him. The old woman's blankness often reaches pathological proportions (e.g., Mrs. Ashtor in "The Death of the Old Man"; Vaducha in *The Lover*; Naomi in *Late Divorce*), while the wife's is mostly expressed by her excessive somnolence. She is not, normally, afflicted with psychosis, schizophrenia or anility, but, for her husband and children, her vacancy of soul is just as exasperating.

The wife's self-absorption, her insensitivity to her family's malaise, seems to underlie the distorting angle in which she is presented to the reader. While the male protagonist is caricatured mainly because of his failure to lead a meaningful and socially responsible life, his wife, since she is not expected to search for meaning or identity in the first place, is satirized for her lack of responsibility toward her family. Yehoshua's protagonist is ridiculous precisely because he does what his wife is supposed to do: roam around the house and worry about his child. His wife, on the other hand, is ridiculous because she does what her husband should do: keep busy with the outside world. The distorted perspective through which Yehoshua presents his broken-up families and neurotic couples is informed by the underlying premise that man's place is in the world, and woman's place—at home.

"A Long Summer Day, his Despair, his Wife and his Daughter," which is included in Yehoshua's second collection of short stories, *Mûl hayye'ârôt* (*Opposite the Forests*), features a typically uprooted protagonist whose estrangement from his wife has exacerbated his despair and confusion. Alarmed by the possibility that he might have cancer, the nameless protagonist—an engineer by profession—is forced to cut short his visit to Kenya, where he had been serving as a consultant, and return to Israel. As soon as he reaches home, however, he realizes that his return makes little difference to both his daughter, who is busy with school and with a budding love affair, and his wife, who is busy with her courses at the university. His wife, Ruth, is only superficially interested in her husband's physical well-being, and she is, moreover, apparently unaware of his emotional stress.

On the night of his arrival home, he begins to notice that his wife attempts to avoid him. Driving home from the airport, Ruth makes an effort to divert attention from the issues that are bothering him, and that should bother her too. As they prepare to go to bed, "A quiet Ruth waited for him by a new glass of tea. There was a deep silence in the universe. Now he wished to begin to tell her about the hospital, but she interrupted him immediately. Not now. Tomorrow. If he insists on talking, let him tell of something else, perhaps about the dam" (1975,

p. 162).<sup>5</sup> Ruth also rejects her husband's sexual overtures. Whereas he "wished to be with her, throw her on the bed and sleep with her, if only to prove that he is still alive," she "pushes him aside lightly" explaining that it is too late (p. 163). While Ruth, oblivious to her husband's anxieties, "fell asleep immediately," he "could not fall asleep." When "desperate, he touched his wife" saying "I cannot fall asleep," she speaks to him "with closed eyes," and finally "goes off like a somnambulist" to fetch him sleeping pills, after which she "fell asleep," while he "did not touch the sleeping pills and did not fall asleep." (p. 163). This scene establishes the fundamental relationship between husband and wife, and it is repeated with variations throughout the story. The husband attempts to make contact with his wife, mentally and physically, and she rejects him, normally using her busy schedule and exhaustion as evasive strategies. When she does communicate with her husband, she brings up trivial issues, doing everything she can to avoid confronting his real malaise. And when she does respond to his needs, she does it somnolently, as if she were moonstruck.

Ruth's emotional and sexual inaccessibility exacerbates the protagonist's anxieties. As she continues to go drowsily through the motions of uxorial duties, he becomes a restless insomniac. He is finally driven to intercepting the letters of Gadi, his daughter Tamara's boyfriend, to torturing Gadi during one of his visits, and almost to running him over. The protagonist's destructive and self-destructive actions do not endow him with an heroic status, but they are understandable. There is something profoundly human in the malaise of the unemployed engineer, the rejected husband, the possibly fatally ill protagonist. Ruth's motivations, by contrast, are less comprehensible. It is not clear whether she avoids her husband for some hidden reason known only to herself, whether she is obtusely unaware of his plight, or whether she is simply cold and indifferent, or even ruthless. As her sleepiness becomes less understandable and more opaque, it grows into a powerful metaphor for her lack of consciousness and distance from reality. In relation to her husband, her inaccessibility functions as a metaphorical wall, one of the walls against which he is beating his head.

A similar situation emerges from "Besis tilim 612" ("Missile Base 612," 1975). The nameless protagonist of this story, like the previous one, is also estranged from his wife. Here too it is the male protagonist's

5. All references to Yehoshua's works and other Hebrew sources are based on my translation.

experiences that are at the center of the story. What makes this protagonist ridiculous is the contrast between his indifference to the national predicament during the war of attrition and the lectures he delivers about "The Israeli Society in a Prolonged Conflict." His involvement in the national effort is superficial; nevertheless he is shown to don his reservist uniform and join the soldiers of Missile Base 612 in the Sinai. His lectures bore his listeners, and he himself is thinking of his little son at home rather than of his topic, but, as inadequate and ridiculous as he may seem, the hero is shown to experience time, and it is his meandering and disoriented experience that reflects the state of a nation in a prolonged state of conflict. Like the society in which he lives and about which he lectures, the protagonist of our story too is undermined by a prolonged conflict as well, a domestic conflict. The theme of the national war parallels the theme of the conjugal war. The protagonist's perverse fascination with the missiles is couched in erotic terms, alluding to the interdependence of violent aggression and frustrated sexuality, thus pointing up the grotesqueness of misplaced affection.

As the protagonist goes through the motions of lecturing at the base, his wife remains at home—deeply asleep. If the protagonist is inadequately involved with the national predicament, his wife is shown to be completely unaware of it. Neither is she aware of her husband's or son's needs. As he prepares to go off to the missile base, "he enters the living room to take his reservist's uniform and is astonished to see her still sleeping in the dark, in the same diagonal position of the night, with a calm face, as if time had come to a stop" (1975, p. 258). But even when awake, the wife does not seem to be more accessible. In response to his anxious questions ("What is the matter with you? You have been sleeping for almost twenty four hours. . . . What is happening to you?"), she answers laconically, with silence, or with rhetorical jabs ("What do you want now? . . . None of your business") (1975, pp. 284–285). The wife's waking hours do not provide us with any more information about her pain than does her prolonged sleep. The sleepy wife functions as an explanatory factor in the characterization of the protagonist, but little is offered in way of explaining her own motivations.

Although *Hamme'ahēb* (*The Lover*, 1977) invests more energy in portraying the inner life of Asya, the protagonist's wife, it does not differ in essence from the basic conception of Yehoshua's short stories. Asya's inner life revolves mostly around her oneiric activities. She lives in a fantasy world, divorced from reality. At night, while Adam searches frantically for Asya's lover, Gavriel Ardit, she dreams about a tall black man who shows her a "European landscape but in an African light"

(1977, p. 277). In another dream she almost makes love to one of her students. Asya's dreams serve, among other things, as an ironic judgment on her conscious behavior. They imply that, underneath the respectable façade of the rational, efficient, and serious high school teacher, there lurks a frustrated female. Asya's professional activity is thus exposed as a brittle encrustation, a mere disguise for an inherently self-indulgent character. This emerges poignantly when Asya uses her research on the French Revolution as an excuse and camouflage for her affair with the French-speaking expatriate Gavriel Arditì. Asya's blankness is ironically juxtaposed with her intellectual pursuits. She is interested in the history of the French Revolution, but not in the state of her marriage. She is aware of the historical roots of Zionism, but not of her husband's growing alienation from her. Adam, on the other hand, is forebodingly aware of the change in his feelings toward his wife. Unlike his wife, who never bothers to think about her husband, he tries to define and analyze her again and again: "But how should I describe her? Where should I start from?" (p. 68). "I look at my wife continuously, observing her from aside, with a stranger's eye. . . . Is it still possible to fall in love with her?" (p. 91).

Perhaps the most unpardonable repercussions of Asya's self-centeredness concern her relationship with her daughter. Like Ruth, who is too busy with her studies to take notice of her daughter ("A Long Summer Day"), and like Haya, who practically endangers her son's life because of her selfish desire to go to the university ("Three Days and a Child"), Asya is too involved with her intellectual pursuits to attend to her daughter's needs. Dafi suffers from this neglect: "'For my mother is absent. I grasped this last year; my mother is absent even when she is at home, and if one really wants to have a heart to heart talk with her, it is necessary to make [an appointment] a week in advance'" (p. 43). The novel intimates that Dafi's sleeplessness and gradual deterioration stem to a great extent from her mother's indifference toward her. The first time Dafi is actually capable of falling asleep is after her mother slaps her: "'She hit me. Perhaps for seven years she has not touched me, and [now] I am starting to calm down, I am relieved . . . something in me opens up . . . something is thawing away'" (p. 343). The comic element in the overwhelming effectiveness of Asya's slap cannot escape the reader, but neither should the satiric sting. Asya sacrifices her family, most notably her daughter, to a career whose economic necessity for the affluent family is highly questionable. The successful teacher is a failure both as a wife and as a mother. The satiric treatment of the modern wife-mother is not necessarily unique to Yehoshua. As Katherine Rogers points out "the undisguised attack on women as mothers" is a rather

recent development in Western literature that is related to the twentieth-century backlash against the liberation and legal equalization of women, as well as to the debunking of the romantic idealization of females (Rogers, 1966, p. 263).

The distorting angle underlying Yehoshua's characterization of the male hero is based on the premise that man belongs in the world. The distortion in his characterization of the female is based on the opposite premise, that woman belongs at home. Woman's professional aspirations are particularly troublesome if she is a wife and a mother. Her professional career is depicted as being in an unavoidable conflict with her traditional and, implicitly, primary roles within the home. Ruth's studies, Asya's teaching, and Dina's artistic aspirations (in *Late Divorce*, 1982) are presented as the major causes of their sexual, conjugal, and maternal malfunctioning.

But the wife's inaccessibility is not always related to a professional career; it often seems to stem from some innate psychological impediment. The wife characters are too insensitive to perceive their families' needs and too selfish to respond to them. Their blankness seems to prevent them from realizing that first and foremost they must be accessible to their husbands and children, and that their natural duty in life is to be responsive to others' needs. Thus, for example, although she is "merely" a housewife, Yael, in *Gerûšîm me'uhârîm* (*Late Divorce*, 1982), is caricatured, among other things, for leaving her ailing son and her baby daughter alone in the house. The baby bursts out crying and Gadi, her brother, is helpless and upset "at Mother for having left me alone with her [the baby] without permission even to pick her up" (1982, p. 21). The ordeal ends with his grandfather, Yehuda, changing the baby's diapers, in the course of which he almost injures the baby accidentally (pp. 21-22). Like Haya and Asya, Yael is neglectful of her children, letting others do "her" job for her.

It would seem that the wife is damned if she pursues a career, and damned as a housewife. In the first capacity she appears to be too busy with herself, too selfish to heed her family's needs. In the second she is too passive, lazy, forgetful and bland to be able to take care of her family effectively. Yael's status as a full-fledged traditional housewife does not redeem her. Her maternal activity amounts to mechanical motions, such as changing diapers and feeding her children. In this respect she is just as absent from the home as are her professional counterparts.

It must be stressed that, although Yehoshua's fathers are far from being parental role models, their relationships with their children are more complex and interesting than the sporadic, mechanical nurturing

of his mothers. The theme of the generation gap, the love-hate relationship between parents and children, is a central motif in "A Long Summer Day," "The Poet's Prolonged Silence," "Early in the Summer of 1970," *The Lover*, and *Late Divorce*, but it is never reflected in the context of a mother-daughter or mother-son relationship. Louise Bernikow points out that in Western fiction, mothers usually have sons—like Oedipus or Hamlet—and daughters had fathers—like Zeus and King Lear—but daughters and mothers rarely inhabited the same world (1980, pp. 42–43). In Yehoshua's fiction, mothers are even deprived of complex and meaningful relations with their sons.

But Yael is not only mindlessly neglectful of her children, she is rendered as being inherently mindless. In opposition to her brothers Zvi and Asi, who feel very strongly about their parents' divorce, the former opposing and the latter supporting it, Yael is incapable of taking sides. Her indecisiveness stems largely from her innate passivity. She is incapable of thinking: "'Does she ever think? Yael, think, just think, we all used to beg her when she suddenly used to get stuck'" (p. 134). She lacks a will of her own: "'Do what you will, I am with you, I am with everybody. And instead of thinking . . . I will remember. You will think for me . . .'" (p. 231). Yael's mental passivity is not very different from the physical inertia of the sleeping wives. Her ability to identify with everybody implies that in fact she identifies with no one. She is formless. As erratic and ridiculous as the male characters may be, they at least have a will. Yael has no will and, therefore, no distinct personality.

Yael's characteristics are paralleled to some extent by her beautiful sister-in-law, Dina, and her aging mother, Naomi, who are both, despite the differences between them, equally inaccessible to their husbands. Like Haya in "Three Days and a Son," Dina is achingly beautiful and unreachable. But while Haya is out of her lover's reach because she is married to another man, Dina is out of the reach of her own husband, Asa. Instead of providing Asa with his sexual needs as becomes a normal wife, Dina occupies herself with futile attempts at writing a novel. Driven by frustration and despair, Asa finds himself making love to a repugnant Tel Aviv prostitute. In a way, Asa is banished from home by Dina, much like his father Yehuda has been driven away by his wife, Naomi. In the case of the aging wife, it is not artistic ambition, but mental illness that drives the husband away. Naomi, we are told, becomes schizophrenic, which is manifested by her episodes of kleptomania, her neglect of her family's needs (she feeds them repulsive meals), and finally by a violent assault on Yehuda himself. As Naomi is committed to a mental asylum, her husband flees to the United States, where he marries a



younger woman. Finally, Yehuda meets his death at his wife's asylum, during the last visit he pays to the recently divorced Naomi, and shortly before his scheduled departure back to the United States.

Despite the differences between the couples, they share to varying degrees the traditional stereotypic dichotomy of male intellectualism and female mental laxity. Yael is passive, while Kedmi, her husband is maniacally active. Whereas she is slow, her husband, the lawyer, is perhaps too sly and conniving for his own good. Dina is lost in her epigonic writing, while Asa teaches history at the university. Despite his fanaticism, Asa is shown to be capable of analytical thinking, which cannot be said about his wife. The male/female dichotomy is most conspicuous in the case of the deranged Naomi, who is incapable of rational thought, and Yehuda, the one-time educator, who is constantly excogitating about his personal fate, that of his children, and that of the entire nation.

If Yehoshua's single girl embodies what attracts the male hero, his mature wife personifies what repels him. The development of both of these types is restricted, for the most part, to the function they fulfil in relation to the male hero. Dafi's growth from childhood to womanhood is important for the same reason that Asya's degeneration into middle age is. The growth of both the girl and the woman, however, is perceived as being only a physical mutation; the female mind does not appear to be affected by the passage of time. In this respect Yehoshua's novels fit the traditional mold in which "Women matured physically, at which point they were ripe for being loved. Then they deteriorated physically, at which point they either disappeared from sight in the novel, or became stereotypes. Once physically mature, they were thought to have reached the peaks of their potential and development, which were defined in physical rather than spiritual, intellectual or emotional terms" (Morgan, 1972, p. 184).

Yehoshua's men do not necessarily mature into responsible adults or develop into more perceptive or productive human beings, either. If anything, they zigzag and flounder into abysses even deeper than those they inhabited at the beginning of the narrative. But as absurd as their growth may be, it is not restricted to the physical. They undergo emotional and psychological changes, they are capable of thinking, experiencing and responding to the outside world. The dichotomy between Yehoshua's male and female characters validates, in the manner of traditional fiction, the conventional concept of masculinity as being dynamic and striving, and of femininity as being static and resistant.

To conclude, a gender conscious analysis of Yehoshua's mode of characterization reveals some important differences between male and female characters, most of which reflect traditional preconceptions of sex roles. Despite the eccentricity of Yehoshua's male characters and their alienation from Israeli society, they nevertheless interact with that society, however marginally or awkwardly. Their activities may be inconsequential, but they are expressive of a national and existential disorientation. The least we can say is that Yehoshua's hero, especially in his later works, experiences time. By contrast, his female characters, like their counterparts in other modern literatures, are exempted from the burden of contemporaneity and allowed refuge either in myth or in stereotypical female roles. Yehoshua's female character is typical in that she exists referentially. Anchored in her femininity and defined largely in relation to man, it is never too certain that Yehoshua's female character has any self at all. More often than not, she serves as an allegorical representation of the land of Israel—an inanimate and impenetrable entity.

It is not clear whether the blankness of the female character in Yehoshua derives from her subordinate status or vice versa, whether her insignificance is a product of her inexorable blankness. Either way, both her blankness and her referentiality are necessary results of an inherently androcentric perspective that identifies humanity with masculinity, and that essentially views women as supporting characters in the drama of life.

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