On: *Flesh of my Flesh: Sexual Violence in Modern Hebrew Literature* by Ilana Szobel

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The release of Ilana Szobel’s book comes at a peculiar time, a period marked by the feeling that the world is changing—albeit at a slower pace than one might wish—in terms of the recognition accorded to not only the very fact of the existence of sexual violence in society, but also the scope of its devastating effects on the experiences of countless individuals and the way it jeopardizes the social fabric, the relations between the genders, and the wellbeing of entire segments of the population. It is at the moment when it seems like the wind is starting to blow in a new direction that we must invest particular efforts in reexamining the various beliefs, conceptions, and norms associated with gender-based violence and in delineating the current state of affairs as it is expressed via cultural channels, literature among them, in order to know whence we have come and where we are headed.

Szobel opens her book with the statement that, in Israeli culture, the depiction of trauma usually focuses on the male, military experience, one that is linked to the national narrative. Female trauma, on the other hand, is perceived as lacking national meaning and is therefore inscribed within the boundaries of the private sphere. The important advance she makes here is to transfer the question of sexual violence and its traumatic repercussions from the private to the public and social spheres and to look at it as a national problem. Szobel shakes up the common conception that places sexual violence outside of the scope of human experience and repositions it within the social order, history, and politics. In contrast to the vision of sexual violence as an antisocial and anti-establishment act, Szobel highlights the feminist approach that sees sexual violence as an inherent part of the socialization processes involved in building and structuring patriarchal society, an “educational tool” that grooms women and children to be the objects of male domination and de facto props up the patriarchal order. Sexual violence is, therefore, at the heart of the dominant culture; it is not a personal or cultural pathology but an inseparable part of the existing world order. As such, it is central to socio-cultural normativity and a deep-seated element of the patriarchal relationships between men and women within the state, society, and the family.

The view of sexual violence as part of the social order and the normal course of life, as opposed to as an aberration that takes place outside of the limits of society, dictates a different approach to incidents of sexual violence. In her literary analyses, Szobel seeks to establish the relentless, penetrative, Sisyphean, and ongoing aspects of sexual trauma: “The key position that characterizes most of the representations of sexual violence in Hebrew literature is that sexual violence is not perceived as a *personal* trauma but rather as an *insidious* trauma” (p. 3, my emphasis). The term “insidious trauma” positions the traumatic event within a wider context of social oppression. This category does not necessarily refer to incidents of violent rape that happened in the past (and are therefore confined to it), but to repeated and cumulative experiences of ongoing oppression within a reality that is perceived as normative even though the constant nature of this state of oppression makes it a traumatic reality for its victims. Szobel presents us with a political reading of her chosen samples of Hebrew literature and shows that it references the social, class-based, economic, national, and political contexts that make sexual violence possible whether the texts that express it contribute to strengthening hegemonic assumptions and shaping oppressive power dynamics or seek to oppose them—whether they enable the status quo or challenge it. Either way, these texts often expose the roots of gender-based and sexual trauma and shed light on the mechanisms that make it possible.

Throughout, the essay upholds both ends of the spectrum it defines—the espousal and empowerment of the patriarchal power balance, on the one hand, and the critical voices undermining patriarchal structures and enabling a relatively wide range of action within the context of oppression, on the other hand. Szobel addresses both those speaking up from the margins, who have experienced insidious trauma, and the writings of more privileged and dominant authors. Her analysis includes several canonical texts, but focuses mainly on lesser known works that encompass a large variety of genres—poetry, fiction, memoir, non-fiction—to present a broad and dynamic picture of the fields of power in the national literary imagination.

Fascinatingly, Szobel chooses not to develop her discussion around representations of sexual violence in mainstream Hebrew literature, even though she would have found ample material of interest there and countless examples— from Nathan Alterman’s *Joy of the Poor*, which is largely informed by the father’s predatory gaze at the character of the daughter, through depictions of rape that juxtapose themes of nationalism and gender in the writings of Amos Oz (such as those found in “Nomad and Viper” or *My Michael*), to the scandalous and hyperbolized dramatization of the power struggle in the works of Hanoch Levin, and so on. Nor does she take on the more major works of women authors who have burst through the barrier of silence surrounding the issue of sexual violence, such as Ruth Almog  Ilana Bernstein, and Lea Aini, or the poets Hila Lahav, Rachel Peretz, Anat Zecharia, and many others who have produced groundbreaking work and brought to light, with great integrity, courage, and defiance, the violent sexual oppression experienced by women. This conscious step away from better-known texts effectively creates a new history and map of the Hebrew canon, one that encourages other voices to break through the silence.

Szobel chooses to focus on more peripheral areas of the literary map, on lesser-known authors and works, some of whom are not even considered or define themselves as “professional” literary authors. This shift of the gaze away from the center is driven by a search for the unspoken areas on the subject, for unlit corners and new perspectives. There are many instances in which Szobel’s essay reveals blind spots in the prevailing discourse on Israeli literature. It insists, for example, on the obscurity and neglect to which a writer from the Yishuv period such as Shoshana Shababo was relegated, despite or because of the very uniqueness of her social and literary position and her writing style. It shows how even feminist discourse on women’s literature sometimes tends to omit issues of sexual violence despite its prominent place in women’s lives and experiences. It also singles out the overwhelming absence of representations of injury and disability in anthologies devoted to the experience of war in Israeli literature. Pointing a floodlight at these blind spots and stepping on the boundary lines of the literary map thus allow Szobel a fresh and discerning look at these issues.

That being said, Szobel is interested not only in expressions of oppression and the capacity for political action within and against the patriarchal framework, but also in how poetic devices work in relation to sexual violence. Her political reading is also a close poetic reading of the mechanisms that shape literary constructs and reflects a belief in the power, influence, constitutive role, and importance of literature in social and national life. Each chapter in the book reveals a different facet of sexual violence and a different way of approaching it through writing. By doing so, Szobel also evokes other questions and issues that emerge from the consistent juxtaposition of personal oppression, social oppression, and literary expression.

In her first chapter, Szobel takes on representations of prostitution in the writings of the authors of the “Revival Generation” and the prominent place—contrary to contemporary norms centered around the establishment of the figure of the new and potent Hebrew male— they give to elements expressing vulnerability, weakness, and frustration. The works of writers such as Yosef Haim Brenner, Aharon Reuveni, Levi Arieh Arieli, and David Vogel display an almost surprising degree of empathy toward the marginalized status of the prostitute. Sex work is perceived as a state of distress arising from social oppression and the experience of disconnectedness, in stark contrast to the romanticization the figure of the prostitute was undergoing in European literature at the time. Although these writers do not give voice to the vulnerable women themselves, they show a sensitive awareness and emotional identification with the sex worker characters, intersecting with the problems of the disconnected Jewish male. Prostitution is not seen as an immoral choice made by dubious women but as a sign of social injustice, a result of gender oppression and economic and social inequality. The place that these writers give to the experience of prostitutes allows them to present an alternative to the dichotomy Zionism establishes between power and action, on the one hand, and victimhood and passivity, on the other hand. Revival literature thus expresses not only a call for empowerment and renewal but also depictions of weakness, frustration, loss, anger, and aggression. These works do not deny the feminine, vulnerable, or impotent aspects of Zionist identity, thus undermining the assumptions linking nationality, gender, and power and suggesting that power and weakness may be two sides of the same identity.

The second chapter deals with the singular writing of a lesser-known author from the same period, Shoshana Shababo, who was born in Palestine in 1910 to parents originating from Morocco and Iran. While the mainstream Zionist literature of the time chose to focus on issues concerning the building of the Jewish nation and the ideological values involved in this endeavor, Shababo preferred to deal with questions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and the oppression of women. Her work shapes sexual violence and sexual exploitation into the central prism through which to observe the Sephardic Jewish community and Middle Eastern women in Mandate-era Palestine, revealing the repressive and racist dimension of the settlement project. Counter to the literary norms of her time, which dictated that rape and sexual exploitation must be portrayed only implicitly, covertly, and without any specific detail, Shababo depicts incidents of sexual violence with blunt, sharp, and critical openness. She also allows her protagonists to express their feminine agency through sexual desire and various ways of subverting or opposing the patriarchy.

In the third chapter, Szobol turns to look at literature dealing with the war-wounded and the problematic dynamic created between wartime injury and sexual violence and exploitation. Despite—or perhaps because of— its great efforts to cultivate iconic heroic images and aestheticize death in combat, Israeli literature, Szobel claims, “fails to bandage its wounded; it ignores and marginalizes them in an attempt to keep the glorifying rhetoric of war straightforward” (p. 71). Szobel shows how these works desexualize the wounded and tend to represent them as existing in a feminine or child-like state, requiring constant care and protection. The path of the wounded back to potent and sexual male society, therefore, necessarily lies through the demonstration of their superiority in the gender hierarchy, which is expressed by way of aggressive chauvinism, sexual intercourse, sexual exploitation, and sexual harassment of the women who care for them: “Rehabilitating the male character demands demeaning and humiliating the female character, and that even a positive development is actually a reinforcement of sexual and gender stereotypes” (p. 88). It is also another way of obfuscating or neutralizing the hard-to-process issues of injury and disability and preventing them from penetrating the public consciousness and undermining faith in the righteousness of war.

While in the first three chapters Szobel mainly addresses the ways in which sexual violence is used as a tool or prism to examine various issues related to the establishment of a national Zionist culture—questions of the power and vulnerability of the new Jewish subject; ethnic subjectivity; the actual experience of victims of sexual violence, as represented in the literature—the last two chapters turn toward the heart of the matter and the actual experiences of victims of sexual violence, as they are represented in literature.

The fourth chapter of the book deals with the autobiographical memoirs of incest victims. Szobel’s premise is that these narratives reflect only the tip of the iceberg of the incest phenomenon, as their very publication attests to how far the writers have had to come—they are all written by highly educated and self-aware women, who feel that they have recovered, to some extent, from the traumatic imprint left by the abuse. In all actuality, the overwhelming majority of the voices remain silent. Thus the picture of the phenomenon at our disposal remains highly partial—it does not reflect the experience of many victims in society, especially those who bear the most negative and destructive effects of abuse.

Szobel argues that even though incest stories mostly come to light within the narrative frame of recovery and overcoming—a frame that also supports the feasibility of their publication and distribution—they do not, in fact, depict a linear line of progress. Rather, they portray a “rhizomatic” emotional experience that does not do away with the vast range of tensions involved in dealing with the trauma—the immovability of the past, the fierce attachment to the figure of the abuser, the difficulty of putting the experience into words alongside the dire need to tell the story, and so on. One of the hallmarks of rhizomatic writing in incest memoirs is the technique of collage and combination of texts of various kinds—narrative fragments, photographs and paintings, transcripts of conversations, documents, and certificates. Szobel suggests that this mixed or hybrid style is “a writing strategy that enables survivors of incest to express in writing that which evades direct description” (p. 116). She writes about the important political and social role of incest stories and the personal success narratives that are mediated through them, and yet she warns of their tendency toward the cliché: “The memoirs narrate the difficulty and pain, but from the perspective of someone who not only managed to personally overcome it but is also in a position to make a personal and social change” (p. 123). In this respect, “their publication serves the same culture that allowed the incest in the first place” (p. 124) and strengthens hegemonic perceptions. Even though these memoirs reveal the immense difficulties of dealing with the trauma of incest, they do not undermine the social and cultural space within which they operate, thus effectively covering up and repressing the cultural problem of incest. Nevertheless, Szobel also offers a more constructive look at the role of the cliché as an essential tool for communication between writers and readers. From this perspective, it is precisely because the narrative of overcoming trauma has become clichéd that it allows these authors to enter the media circle, to communicate their painful stories, and evoke emotional identification within the shared social space offered by the language of the cliché.

Indeed, there is room to pause and ponder the feminist language of empowerment, which takes care to talk about “incest survivors” rather than victims. This is a politically-correct discourse that one must question, since the language of survival and overcoming may serve as another expression of how society cannot bear victimhood in and of itself and the difficult feelings—contempt, filthiness, nonexistence, and repulsion—it evokes. It is a rejection of the victim’s position as valuable and valid. One of the questions that Szobel’s discussion of incest narratives—those that have been published—brought up for me was how we might allocate space for the victim’s voice as a victim; i.e., not limit the discourse to that of the ex-victim, but include the discourse coming from within the experience of victimhood itself.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that “the narrative of overcoming” is less mono-directional than Szobel presents it to be; in fact, her own close readings reveal it to be so. If anything, these texts show that overcoming, when it is even possible, does not consist of advancing along a single line from beginning to end, but is rather a continuous action that has to be performed all the time, a Sisyphean task that sends one back and forth, in leaps and setbacks, bouts of triumph and defeat, from the subjugated position of victim to the so-called potent position of literary creation and back again. In fact, one might even inhabit these two separate and opposing positions simultaneously. As Szobel herself maintains, the memoirs “establish anarchic structures that prevent one-dimensional statements or reductive generalizations about incest” (p. 126).

In the fifth chapter, Szobol turns her attention from memoirs about the trauma of incest to its poetic representation and discusses the poetry of Tsvia Litevsky—a contemporary Israeli poet—and how she shapes her experience as a victim of incest and emotional neglect on the part of her parents. As a direct development of the critique presented in the previous chapter, Szobel’s close, sensitive, and insightful reading reveals defense and processing mechanisms that are not subject to the narrative of “from harm to growth” characteristic of the memoirs. Instead they show how survival is sometimes acquired at the cost of losing subjectivity—as illustrated, for example, in Litevskiy’s use of metamorphoses, which function as poetic dissociations. This is poetry as a gateway into the danger zone, a place where approaching the electric field of the violation is at the same time an attempt to get out of it, and self-erasure is, in fact, an attempt to remain present in the lives of the abusive and neglectful parents.

True to the identification of the personal with the political, just as she rejects the validity of the “from harm to growth” narrative in the personal experience of incest survivors, so Szobel wholeheartedly discards the popular assumption regarding the “progress” made on the issue of sexual violence—from silencing to listening, from conservatism to openness. Ostensibly, the great achievements of the feminist movement have led to the breakdown of silencing mechanisms and thus to a new and open approach to the issue, which entails listening to the voices of the victims. Szobel, however, argues that this narrative of progress is, in fact, simplistic and illusory. Early twentieth-century women’s literature broke down mechanisms of silence and silencing and presented sharp and critical attitudes in ways that are not always present in end-of-the-century literature: “While Israeli literature from the 1980s on explicitly tackles these issues far more often and in more direct ways, the range of possibility for processing and coping with the aftermath of sexual trauma is surprisingly limited” (p. 161). In the afterword to the book, Szobel writes that today’s literature deals with the themes of empowerment, survival, and overcoming the trauma (whereas in the past, authors such as Dahlia Ravikovitch, Shoshana Shababo, and Amalia Kahana-Carmon, to name a few, were more likely to represent vulnerability, victimhood, and muteness). While “the feminist movement has had an undeniable positive influence on personal, social, and therapeutic approaches to sexual violence in Israel and around the world” (p. 160), Szobel emphasizes that we cannot trace a linear path of progress from silence to speaking out or from women’s objectification to women’s agency. In fact, the earlier texts often show more openness and daring in approaching the subject.

With all that said, I must remark that in recent years, and thanks to the influence of the #MeToo movement, there has been a marked rise in the treatment of issues of sexual violence in literature (Szobel’s book is itself, in fact, part of this literary wave). A growing number of women are addressing these issues in poetry, prose, and non-fiction, and every month sees the publication of numerous books on the subject, from both feminist (such Marva Zohar’s recently published brilliant and terrifying book of poetry) and more conservative directions (such as *The Liar* by Ayelet Gundar-Goshen). While a large amount of publications cannot be considered an indication of ideological progress or a new sensitivity in the approach to the issue of sexual violence, when I think of books that have been published in recent years—such as *Love* by Maayan Eitan, which speaks in the fictional voice of a sex industry worker; *And They Went, and Came Into an Harlot’s House* edited by Loren Milk, a social literary anthology that combines poetry, testimonies, and short stories by representatives of all genders, which deal with sexual trauma and its repercussions in order to grant poetic expression to the survivors and raise awareness of the devastating impacts of sexual assault and the traumatic world the accompanies it; *The Amsterdam Protocole* by C. Bat Sheva, which tells the tale of a rape victim looking back on the assault from the vantage of time; Hilah Lahav’s exquisite poem, *Until the Morning*, which dramatizes the biblical story of the Levite’s concubine as a contemporary account of gang rape, to name but a few among many—these works attest to a new attitude, imbued with political awareness and a protest agenda, that does not shy away from the issue of sexual violence in the slightest, does not try to soften or shroud it, or subject it to a conventional and pre-defined narrative.

In the course of reading, I noticed that the term “identification” is repeated in various forms across Szobel’s analyses. This is the case, for example, in her discussion of the Hebrew writers of the Revival Generation, who identify with or feel empathy for the prostitutes in their stories and their marginal, downtrodden position, which echoes the emotional and ideological detachment of the protagonists themselves. This is a complex identification that juxtaposes “ethnic inferiority and gender superiority while recognizing a diffuseness between the two position” (p. 28). The second chapter deals with the identification of the Mizrahi writer Shoshana Shababo with the character of a Christian nun named Maria, or with an Arab worker named Fatima, an identification that, uncommonly for Hebrew literature, is not based on categories of religion and nationality but on geographical location, ethnicity, gender, and the experience of sexual violence shared by female figures from different groups. The fourth chapter raises the importance of the readers’ emotional identification with the experience of victims of incest, an identification that may also be formed through the use of clichés such as the narrative of overcoming trauma, since clichés operate in a social space shared by the writers and their readers. In the fifth chapter, which deals with the poetry of Tsvia Litevsky, Szobel points to mechanisms of identification with the aggressor, which provide the victim with an illusion of control and protection. The victim projects her own weakness on her father and in doing so imbues him with traits of vulnerability. The father’s power and his weakness involve feelings of inaction, choice, and omnipotence, and the identification becomes a dangerous symbiosis, which threatens to annihilate the victim’s self. In the afterword, Szobel’s reading of Amalia Kahana-Carmon’s story “Be’er Sheva, Capital of the Negev” underscores the identification of the soldier, Ilana, with the Arab prisoner, a cross-national identification that positions Ilana’s experience of sexual violence side by side with the Arab’s experience of captivity—in a sense, they are both prisoners—thus expressing the simultaneity and parallelism between sexual and national violence.

It is no coincidence that a discussion of power dynamics, sexual violence, and literature should continually return to this term and its collocations. Identification is a process by which the subject invests themselves with an aspect or trait of the other, becoming like them in some way—as if “catching” this aspect or trait—and possibly even changing as a result. Hence, the power of identification to shape and formulate the subjective identity as it is formed through the series of identifications that make up our lives. On the face of it, identification seems to be a structure that runs counter to hierarchical power relations, since it creates similarity between parts and thus, ostensibly, erases the gap between them and equates their value. Identification may indeed be expressed as empathy, closeness, solidarity, and concern, or in positive ways of development and empowerment out of the desire to resemble a benevolent other. But in fact, identification may also involve aggression, denial, and self-erasure. It may reduce the other to the concepts of the self, negate the recognition of the otherness of the other or the gap between them and the self, or conversely, subjugate the self to the concepts of the other, thus nullifying it (the self). Szobel, in whose book the construction of gender identity is a subject that arises in one shape or another throughout its chapters, moves along this spectrum and presents the different contributions identification can make to the building of identity, the ways in which it might broaden the boundaries of the subject, cross them, minimize them, or cancel them out.

*Flesh of my Flesh* shows how, in the Hebrew literature that accompanied and expressed the process of the establishment of the Jewish nation-state, sexual violence became an inseparable part of constructing heterosexual Zionist maleness. Representations of sexual violence are a key component in the gender, ethnic, and national construction of Israeli-Jewish identity. While Szobel does not directly address the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its relevance to representations of sexual violence, in the book’s afterword, she remarks that the gender and power relations in Hebrew literature bear the stamp of this conflict: “Just as Hebrew literature exposes the fact that sexual violence is inherent in and does not contradict patriarchal thinking, focusing on sexual violence in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict carries the risk of exposing and highlighting the sexual aggressiveness inherent in Israeliness itself” (p. 161). Szobel’s book, which demonstrates the widespread, prominent and constitutive place of sexual violence in Hebrew literature and Israeli culture and their preoccupation with issues of male power and control, also reveals the challenges of coping with this culture. These include not only the challenge of fighting sexual violence, which contains the struggle for terminating domination over another people, but also the difficulties of recognizing and accepting victimhood, weakness, helplessness, and hopelessness. It is an important and rich contribution to the study of Hebrew and Israeli literature, and an invitation to expand our literary explorations to questions of economics and class, law and morality, ethics and politics, and to challenge our fundamental assumptions on these issues.