**“Masters of Mopology” – Yemenite Maids and Cleaning Ladies**

**in Hebrew Literature**

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**Abstract**

This essay explores various representations of maids of Yemeni descent in Hebrew literature focussing on their image as reflecting the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity. We argue that these representations reveal the role of Yemenite maids in constructing the social-class-ethnic fabric from the pre-state period to the present. We suggest that these representations sometimes validated the hegemonic class- ethnic -cultural relations while in other times defied them.

The prevalent public image of Yemenite maids presented them as women with no needs. Ironically it stands in sharp contrast with how needed they were. Yemeni maids scrub away the dirt and are also the ultimate others. They are the “dirty ones” that produce the stratification essential for a hierarchical society predicated on specific ethnic and class hegemony. Their skin-deep description is reductively uniform, with suggestive markings like blackness, dearth and habitus that signifies inferior otherness. However, look deeper and you will find their representations reveal a whole gamut of expressions and possibilities.

There seems to be a gap between the ways that female and male authors represent these maids: Hegemonic Ashkenazi women (Nechama Pukhachewsky, Bracha Habas, and Judith Katzir) express varying degrees of solidarity or sympathy towards their maids. Hegemonic Ashkenazi men (Yitshak Yatziv, Nathan Alterman, Levin Kipnis), on the other hand, highlight their otherness, servanthood and marginality. Beginning in the mid-1960s, resistance poetry has been penned, contesting the maid-Yemenite woman equation. The sons who write of their maid mothers identify with them while extending them compassion and protesting their subjection. Their main grievance concerns the mother’s Yemeniteness, rather than her womanhood. As a result of this literary manoeuvre, the maid’s voice remains altered. The Yemenite maid herself has yet to speak. Only with Bracha Serri’s poetry, starting in the early 1980s, and more so with Yonit Naaman’s writing, that this specific strand of subalterness finds its voice. Bracha Serri and Yonit Naaman, each in her own way, laid the foundation for an autonomous feminine subject that asserts both its gender and ethnic identities. Literature reflects and generates cultural perceptions and images; the different representations of Yemenite maids in Hebrew literature reveal their role in the construction of the ethnic fabric of Israeli social classes and exposes the relationship between hegemonic culture and its subordinates.

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