**Gila Danino-Yona**

# Bottle Blonde in Hollywood?

## On Feminism, Gender, Ethnicity, and Race in the Children's Book *Malki Monroe Mordukh*: A Case Study

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In this article, I examine the fate of a literary figure through an intersectional analysis of gender, ethnicity, and race. The article seeks to expose the potential damage of a hegemonic book with a feminist, thematic framework that tells the story of a character from an ethnic group perceived by the hegemony as marginal and inferior. It will demonstrate how the protagonist, located on the gender and ethnicity axis, is subjected to both gender and ethnic oppression via a hegemonic feminist discourse, both within the story and beyond it.

The study of children's literature necessitates discussion of both the written and visual texts because children lack critical tools and are at an age when socialization takes place – on gender, ethnicity, social class, etc. Canonical literature, even for children, is not written in a vacuum, but is shaped by the hegemonic discourse while at the same time shaping that discourse, reflecting society, and influencing attitudes and values through the construction of

identities. The avowed purpose of children's literature is to give pleasure by creating an imaginary reality, while the latent purpose is to instill a hegemonic worldview of social, ideological, and political realities. The simultaneous use in children's literature of both languages – text and visual – reinforces the presentation of the imaginary reality as if it were actual reality. Despite the differences between the literary and the visual languages, they are essentially similar – conveying ideas through different media.

I chose *Malki Monroe Mordukh*[1] as a case study because it exemplifies the change of racialization practices in canonical Israeli children's literature from overt to covert stereotypical racial iconography, and reflects the Gordian knot of ethnicity, periphery, and social class for Mizrahi characters. This is an Ashkenazi hegemonic creation that heightens the contrast between east and west. It demonstrates the practices of racialization: conceptualizing the Mizrahi and justifying social hierarchies by presenting the Mizrahi as inferior, which allows the hegemonic group to remain invisible and preserve its status. I will argue here that a feminist, Mizrahi character is not given the privilege of breaking the feminist glass ceiling, but is exposed to racism and double oppression – gender and ethnic. The gender oppression does not allow her to exit the private sphere and truly enter the public sphere; it allows her to successfully enter the world only in an imaginary reality, in fantasy. The racist and ethnic oppression manifests itself in the construction of the character as inferior – lacking potential and any chance of success.

1 Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir Publishing, 2010.

## LITERARY ANALYSIS: GENDER OPPRESSION. ETHNIC OPPRESSION. RACISM. EXCLUSION

The book *Malki Monroe Mordukh* written by Nurit Zarchi and illustrated by Batia Kolton brings the story of the girl Malka Mordukh, nicknamed Malki, who dreams of becoming a famous Hollywood star. The story of Malki, the female protagonist, takes place in an imaginary reality within the private sphere,[2] though she yearns to enter the public sphere. One of the deepest and most profound ways our culture engages in social construction is through this ideological-political distinction between the private and the public. Social norms construct the woman's role as taking place in the private sphere, the home, while the man acts in the public sphere. This distinction allows for the exclusion of women, and the feminine, from public-political space, preserves inequality, and upholds the differences between the sexes as if they were part of the natural order, rather than the patriarchal order. In literature, children's literature in particular, legitimacy for a woman to enter the public sphere is usually bestowed only for reasons related to family needs and a woman's obligations to the private sphere. Entering the public sphere obliges women to transgress the "natural order." This will generally be restricted in time and space, and she will normally be accompanied by others. Thus, in children's books, rarely does one find a description of a female character entering the public sphere for purposes of realizing her dream or personal goal, but if so, she is usually a hegemonic figure who is ethnically nondescript. Malki experiences her life in between the spheres, between reality and dream, lived in the

2 This includes domains circumscribed by space and time, such as school, transport to school, and the neighborhood.

reality of her constricted life at home, in the neighborhood, and at school.

Malki's dream is very different from her life, just as her name Malka [meaning "queen" in Hebrew] differs from the reality of her life. She lives in a provincial neighborhood lacking specific geographic traits, where the surname "Mordukh" locates her as a Kurdish-Iraqi, where this name is common among Jews, deriving from the name Mordekhai. Malki is a weak student, and therefore she "...spends many hours in school, first at the regular lessons, and in the afternoon at remedial lessons for those who have not yet mastered reading and writing" [page 10].

As noted, the biographical and geographical facts about Malki, stereotypical of an unsuccessful Mizrahi girl, are not in her favor, and she takes various steps intended to enable her to become a Hollywood star. She is encouraged by the initials of her name, which allow her to escape the reality of her life and her real name, and which open up possibilities of realizing her dream:

> *She would also draw the letters "M.M." again and again on the blank pages, because if somebody wants to be a Hollywood star, it's good to have one's first and last names begin with the same letter [page 5].*

Names resonate culturally with associations of ethnicity, origin, and social class; the purpose of the name-change is to trade low symbolic capital for high symbolic capital, which enables social mobility. In addition, Malki colors her hair blonde in order to promote herself so she can fulfill her dream. The story, which has her thinking that her hair color has the power to affect

her chances of success, marks Malki as superficial and implies criticism of her for not thinking about the qualities and skills required for Hollywood success – acting ability, voice and singing development. Malki is focused on her outer appearance – the longing for blonde hair and whiteness is built into the east-west relationship: blonde as an elitist social marker for those whose blonde hair is natural, and lowered branding for someone faking it. The Israeli derogatory term for someone pretending to be a blonde is *shkhordinit*, meaning a bottle blonde. Malki, to her consternation, did not manage to look like a real blonde. [See Hebrew page 70-71]

In her efforts to color her hair, Malki is engaging in *hishtakhnezut*, i.e., trying to channel Ashkenazim. Her effort to become an Ashkenazi is, however, doomed to failure. As noted by Sasson-Levy and Shoshana (2014), the ethnic subject forever remains an ethnic-Mizrahi. Does the possibility of different ethnic behavior suggest that one can cross symbolic ethnic boundaries? The process of "becoming Ashkenazi" depicted in the story reveals that in the case of Malki, boundary crossing is not possible. What's more, the attempt to become Ashkenazi, as could be presumed, is what causes Malki to be punished at the end of the story for her radical attempt to destroy "the fiction of ethnic coherence"[3] intended to preserve the existing social order that seeks to entrench the congruence of ethnicity, skin and hair color, behavior, and chances of success in life.

3 The "fiction of ethnic coherence" is used by Orna Sasson-Levy and Avi Shoshana (2014), who assert that the presumed coherence of ethnicity, skin color, and behavior does not exist in reality.

Malki's family and social circles disparage her dream. Malki's parents, who have internalized the disdainful gaze at them, explain to her that her chances of success are hopeless, and they replicate in their parental worry the symbolic ethnic boundaries, calling upon Malki to return to the fold with its accepted ethnic divisions. Out of their desire to offer a practical solution, they hope that a pet will help her return to reality: "Her parents said that she has to clear her head of that nonsense, and perhaps a dog will help" [page 8] [See Hebrew page 74].

Before examining the turning point in the plot that occurs with the dog, I would like to address two matters: the question of pets in children's literature, and how the dog is depicted in the story. Usually, pets are a metonym for children, whether they appear as realistic or imaginary.

Malki gets a Chihuahua as a gift from her uncle. A Chihuahua is the smallest dog species in the world, having big eyes and long, pointy ears. Chihuahuas are stubborn, brimming with curiosity, and defined as a toy dog. Malki and the dog have one prominent feature in common, visible in the illustration and implied in the story – they both have big eyes; with reference to Malki, the double entendre is intentional. With the exception of this feature, the contrast between the dog and Malki is striking. In creating the visual image of the dog, the illustrator stated in an interview that it had to be "a witty and independent wonder dog", i.e., a dog with potential. The creators of Malki were less generous toward her: "The new dog was a real blonde, not like Malki" [page 6].

Malki assigns the dog a glitzy Hollywood name – "Marilyn Monroe Mordukh" – so that her initials will be "M.M.M.", similar to her

own, but more intense, which could increase her chances of realizing the dream and getting to Hollywood. Malki tries to follow in the footsteps of Marilyn Monroe and channels the star in two ways – she changes her name (as Norma Jean Baker changed to Marilyn Monroe), and she colors her hair. Malki, as noted, remains a bottle blonde, and her attempt to achieve the glamorous world of stars falls short. Furthermore, she spends hours at school in remedial lessons for children who have not yet mastered reading and writing. She is not aware of her education gap and hopes to learn how to read and write before the final episode of "Who Wants to Go to Hollywood?". The illustration positions the reader in a critical, and perhaps even condescending, attitude toward Malki, who is shown asleep at her desk during remedial lessons alongside the poster, "If you will it, it is no legend". This makes Malki look ridiculous and perhaps even contemptible because, as noted, if you only want it enough, you will succeed; and if you do not succeed, that's because you are not doing the bare minimum required of you. [See Hebrew page 75]

Despite her intent to get home in time to watch the final episode, Malki misses the show. Thus, she loses twice – the chance to do well at reading and writing, and the chance to participate in the final episode, missing the opportunity to vie for her dream. "Who Wants to Go to Hollywood?" is a reality show in which the viewers participate, while the dog – for whom Malki had left the TV turned on so it would not be bored – had watched the program and even won! Malki hears the neighbors saying, "What, you didn't see the final? The dog won. I guess it had what it takes. It pressed all the right buttons, exactly." [page 14] [See Hebrew page 76].

Malki arrives just when the pink limousine with her dog inside is heading out to Hollywood. The dog is on its way to realizing Malki's dream. From the illustration (page 13), the entire neighborhood seems to be gathered in excitement – neighbors of all ages, demonstrating that the thrill of the reality show happening in reality erases all age differences, and everyone is caught up in the bedazzlement of the glamor symbolized by the limousine. Malki now appears in three scenes, which actually take just moments. The perspective of the three illustrations is frontal. It is the moment when Malki's dream shatters and slips away from her. In the three pictures, we see Malki from the side or the back, making identifying her image difficult, as we are not looking directly unto her face or eyes, an angle that suggests our distancing from the object illustrated, from Malki, at this very critical moment for her in the plot [See Hebrew page 78].

After the passage of some time, Malki receives two postcards by mail, and she alone – not her parents or friends from school or the neighbourhood – is convinced that these postcards came from her dog in Hollywood. Her parents and friends are sceptical of Malki's belief that this is a postcard from the dog.

> *Malki explained to her mother that based on what's seen on the card, it is definitely Marilyn Monroe Mordukh. Her mother simply responded, "Maybe, it's not clear." Because the makeup in her eyes made it hard for her to see. Her father also didn't see so clearly, even after he put on his glasses, but Malki saw clearly. She didn't wear makeup and didn't need glasses [page 17].*

One of the postcards, it turns out, announces a TV show in which the dog and famous actors will appear. That evening, the entire neighbourhood gathers in the Mordukh family house to watch the program together. Even the mayor arrives. This is characteristic of the informal atmosphere of the "neighborhood", and not in the good sense of the word. It seems to be the stereotype of a get-together of neighbors in a Mizrahi neighborhood – the simplicity and accessibility of the mayor, a parody of characters dressed elegantly in honor of the TV event in their neighbors' home– the synthetic furs, evening gowns, the man in a white suit, and the man in an undershirt and polka-dotted underwear. The illustration seeks to designate Malki's neighborhood as a symbol of the shallowness of a society that adulates celebrities and does not distinguish between reality and imagination. Batia Kolton, the illustrator of the story, claims that in the process of illustrating the plot locale, she and the author agreed that the plot should take place...

> *...somewhere with a provincial mentality, not a specific geographic place. It was clear to me that the fantasy is internal and can take place anywhere. To strengthen it and give it credibility, it could not happen in a big city, but in any provincial location. A kind of general, anonymous archetype of a residential area, and I thereby neutralized entirely the issue of the surroundings and narrowed it to a locator only.*

The illustrator's interpretation of a provincial mentality led to her drawing an ethnic visual that corresponds with the Israeli narrative of Mizrahim in the low-brow provincial periphery.

The more the TV program continues without the dog making an appearance, the more the visitors lose patience and start talking about politics. At the very last moment, when Malki is swallowing her tears of disappointment...

> *After even the credits had ended and Malki was left with no hope, who does she see moving quickly across the screen? With shiny diamond barrettes in her hair, pearls and gold jewelry on her neck, and toenails painted purple [page 26]?* [See Hebrew page 80]

The description of the dog in glittering ornaments transforms Malki and her dream into a farce. No one really saw the dog on television. Again no one believes Malki that the dog was really on television. In the words of her mother and others...

> *"So, what happened, your Marilyn didn't make an appearance yesterday?" she was asked in the morning by the children at school and even just people she met on the street... "You wish. Your imagination."..."You don't have to be sad. It was stupid from the beginning to believe that Marilyn would appear on TV" [pages 28-29].*

Malki, who remains loyal to her fantasy world, sends a postcard by return mail to the dog in Hollywood:

> *On the back of the postcard she had received, the one with the announcement, she wrote something in big letters, in very clear writing, the way she had learned in the remedial lessons. To Marilyn Monroe Mordukh, in Hollywood, but I did see you [pages 30-31].*

Malki is a lonely heroine, one who receives no support from her family, her friends, or the neighbors, and not even from the story that wrenches her and us, the readers, between a gray reality and a pink dream. Indeed, the readers must resign themselves to the internal logic of the plot, which leaves Malki in her proper place in terms of the gender and ethnic social order – in the neighborhood, the private sphere. Malki is excluded twice – once in terms of gender and once in terms of her ethnic-social class.

In Israeli scholarship, the concept of exclusion receives prominent attention in the feminist context, particularly compared to ethnic and national distinctions. But feminist critiques of this story cannot ignore Malki's choice of the object of her dream – Marilyn Monroe, considered a role model of beauty and a sex symbol, sensitive, lacking in self-confidence, a glamorous actress who was not taken seriously professionally. An actress who was commodified and criticized for her free sexuality. Feminist critique will have to explain why a story with a female heroine dreams of the narrowly viewed beauty narrative, which commodifies and oppresses women. Ethnic-Mizrahi critique will have to grapple with the question of why this story places Malki in a Mizrahi space and does not allow her, even in the framework of fiction, to realize her dream, to break through the borders and succeed in the world, but rather leaves her to languish in the neighborhood.

### THE STORY IS NOT THE WHOLE STORY: HEGEMONY. MARGINALITY. RACISM.

Text mediates between the reader and reality, between the story as a representation of reality and the story as an attempt to restructure it. The choices and attendant meanings assume that

the writer exercises a set of considerations – literary, esthetic, political, social, and other – manifest and latent – of their own consciousness, informed by the values in the cultural space in which the author lives and writes.

Thus, the story itself is not the whole story. The story also includes those who tell it, in this case, the author and the illustrator. Both are native born, Ashkenazi Israelis, well respected canonical and hegemonic writers in their field, and winners of many prizes. This literary work creates two female characters: a Mizrahi girl and her dog, the latter overly decked out in "diamonds...pearls... gold jewelry" (page 26), a description that is interchangeable with the derisive term *freha*[4] – marginal characters who live in the periphery. On the manifest level, the story has a feminist underpinning as it "stars" a young girl. Male protagonists are more common in children's literature, therefore a story starring a girl is assumed to be feminist.

The creators of this story, from their perspective in the social hierarchy, seem to have given center stage to Malki, a Mizrahi girl from the periphery, in order to signal her "otherness" and disparage her, as a priori justification for the lack of ability inherent in her ethnicity. Malki's identity is constructed by the hegemony as the negative of a photo. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who expands the analytical concept "subaltern" to groups sharing the bottom of the gender, ethnic, or class hierarchy, western women cannot represent subaltern women because at the heart of this representation stands the baseless promise of

4 A derogatory term referring to Mizrahi females, which attributes to them rudeness, ignorance and empty-headedness.

redeeming the colonial subject, which would justify the previous imperialist involvement. In this story, the creators reinforce the ideology that preserves the ethnic order in Israel, drawing the symbolic boundaries created in hegemonic-Ashkenazi discourse, an ideology that is usually not overtly articulated.

Colonialist-hegemonic speech about, and in the name of, subalterns does not give them a voice, but rather silences them. A corollary to this is when western feminists writing about "third world" women transgress by their very critique and are collaborating with oppressive forms of discourse that manifest racism and paternalism. These claims, and that women from the dominant groups have a role in the oppression of women from marginalized groups, have been fundamental to Mizrahi feminism in Israel.

Mizrahi women are caught between three worlds: the Arab patriarchal world from their place of origin, the Eurocentric world in a colonialist country, and the world of Jewish religious tradition. In these worlds, the oppression of women is more intense, and women emerge with confused, fractured identities, not perceiving themselves as they are in reality, but in the mirror that society has created, which highlights their ethnic features. The efforts of Mizrahi women to grapple with this are varied, and some feel inferior and an unconscious desire to be "white", which is understandable and replicated by hegemonic society that sanctifies whiteness. The contrast between Malki's attempts to succeed and the opportunities given to her by the creators of this book is the story behind the story.

It is not my intent to free Malki from her image as a Mizrahi child, but rather to liberate her from the negative connotations, and to

hope that Mizrahi girls in the 21st century will not undergo the "ethnicization" that disempowers them and contributes to their failure, as experienced by their grandmothers in the 1950s.

Due to production constraints, bibliographic references in some of the English articles appear only in the Hebrew edition of this book.