

A Mediterranean Mayflower?

Introducing Ronit Matalon

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Ronit Matalon (b. 1959, Ganei Tikva, Israel) is a major voice in contemporary Israeli fiction. After having written three novels (two appear in English translation, with a third underway), one children's book, a collection of short stories, a novella, and a volume of essays, Matalon has clearly established her reputation and has received an array of prizes and honors. One mark of her position in Israeli literature was exhibited by the scandal stirred after she published her novella *Galu et pane'ha* (Uncover Her Face; 2006), when the doyen of Hebrew literature Dan Miron and the editor of *Haaretz's* literary supplement Benny Tzipper attacked the work and its author, while prominent scholars such as Galit Hasan-Rokem and Chana Kronfeld rose to Matalon's defense.¹ Beyond the contents of this wildly fantastic and ferocious urban legend of love and aggression, the very publication of a story by Matalon was clearly considered a cultural event to be reckoned with.

If one is to highlight a striking or remarkable characteristic that readers note about her work, it is that Matalon cannot be pinned down. Two of the articles in this issue of *Prooftexts*, by Hannan Hever and Shimrit Peled, are devoted to a particular novel, *Ze im ha-panim eleinu* (The One Facing Us; 1995). Hever and Peled's variant readings of it join previous diverging interpretations by Gil Hochberg,² Deborah Starr,³ Nissim Kalderon,⁴ Avner Holtzman,⁵ Barbara Mann,⁶ and Batya Gur z"l,⁷ and the possible meanings are hardly exhausted. Matalon's prose brings together self-conscious art, piercing political criticism, Israeli politics of

ethnicity, nationality, territory, family, and intimacy, as well as emotional depth and psychological insight that are powerful and rare.

Matalon is one of the most well read and intellectual authors Hebrew literature has produced since Lea Goldberg, and thus reading her work is an experience at once demanding and complex, but also rewarding. Her novels and stories continuously challenge the limits of their genres as well as those of language and narrative. She achieves her ends by including photographs and paintings, extracts from other authors (most recently from Dumas's *The Lady of the Camellias*), and even gardening manuals. Matalon's writing displays a deep awareness of post-structuralist and neo-Marxist thought, and her stories not only integrate selections from essays (as from Jacqueline Kahanoff's writings in *Ze im ha-panim eleinu*, George Steiner's autobiographical *Errata in Galu et pane'ha*, or her own essays about the first Intifada embedded in *Sarah, Sarah* [2000],⁸ but also maintain an intimate exchange with Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, among others, as emerges clearly from the three articles appearing here.

While Matalon's prose hosts a wide variety of texts and voices, her fiction can also contradictorily be described as literary autarky, offering its stories while simultaneously producing a self-reflective gaze of interpretation. Story and meta-story are woven, one into the other, and seemingly render a critical view of them redundant. This is similar to autobiography, which also dwells on the conditions of its making, exposing narrative possibilities that were discarded and the craft of storytelling. Matalon often flaunts a fabricated autobiographical voice, and thus conjures the intricacies of autobiographical narration, without signing a commitment to "the autobiographical pact."⁹ Vivid examples include scenes that appear in her autobiographical essays and repeat themselves in fiction, or a photo in *Ze im ha-panim eleinu* entitled "Jacqueline Kahanoff, Uncle Moise and Mother, the banks of the Nile, Cairo, 1940" (Hebrew edition, 130; English, 123), which is in actuality a photograph taken at a train station in Warsaw.¹⁰ Matalon's stories, as they are told, bring to the surface the multiple possibilities of narration and the paths not taken. They lead us to question if a storyline is, in fact, possible. These exposures may stifle the options of reflection upon them. They paradoxically stand before us almost hermetically inaccessible in their nudity, in their stark self-awareness. But surprisingly, this analytical fiction meets its readers on an emotive-sensual plane. The

sensual material potential of language is always emphasized: “She savored words like a winemaker, letting them do their work, turning metaphor into reality in one daring leap, and forcefully ripping them from their ordinariness.”¹¹

Matalon’s plots have produced some of the most memorable characters and scenes in Israeli literature of the last decades. Recall Ofri, in *Bliss*, who seeks her friend Sarah out in the street with infant Mims, whose circumcision his mother has just escaped, puts the baby to his mother’s breast and commands that she nurse (*Sarab*, 175–76; *Bliss* 143–44). Or, in the same novel, the compassion evoked by the sisters in their too-tight pencil skirts who wheel the supermarket cart, loaded with food to serve after the funeral, down a deserted suburban French road, Marcel having declared that she’s always wanted a cart like that at home (*Sarab*, 58; *Bliss* 43).

Matalon’s stories deal with the core problems of Israeli culture—such as the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and inner-colonialism in Ashkenazi–Mizrahi power relations—and simultaneously with universal issues such as love, friendship, family relations, domestic violence, moral responsibility, and the scope of art. Her language stands out in its austere accuracy. Blending Hebrew, Arabic, French, and English, she has created a unique “formula” or *nusah* that mimics not only Levantine linguistic blends but also the spoken language of immigrants and second-generation, Israeli-born speakers, merged with a sophisticated imagery of elaborate prose, which has kept her fiction far from pathos, yet near its protagonists.¹² Language is inherently conceived in Matalon’s work as limited in its capacity to represent: “Language does not do justice to what meets the eye, it changes its nature, changes the makeup of what is seen—transfers it to the despairing sieves of abstraction, of material melted” (*Ze im ha-panim eleinu*, 195; not translated in the English, *The One Facing Us*, 179). Specificity and detail are, therefore, privileged.

Matalon has and should be read within the Mizrahi context of Israeli culture, within the frame of post-colonial thought and of political critique. She can and should also be read along the lines of new Israeli feminist writing.¹³ From its initial appearances, her work has questioned what it means to be a writing woman, how women’s voices sound, and how women’s languages and bodies move in Israeli culture.

Sex in Matalon’s work is a site of alienation and oppression, whether because it is a form of extreme self-depreciation or self-annihilation, as it is figured in the early

short story “*Yalda ba-kafé*” (A Girl at the Café; [1986], 1990) because it is rape, as it appears in her first published story (“Madam Rachelle,” 1979) and in the novel *Bliss*, or because it is an extreme manifestation of the destruction of a relationship (as in *The Sound of Our Steps*, where the unimaginable becomes a vivid possibility because it is destructively spoken when the mother assumes an incestuous relationship between her husband and her own mother). The capacity or incapacity to speak out about sexual violence prescribes the characters’ identities (In *Bliss*, Ofri has her mouth stuffed with earth and weeds; when as an adult she brings the subject up with Sarah, Sarah stops the conversation by stating that it doesn’t matter; in *Galu et paneha* the deserting lover touches the narrator’s legs under her skirt as he silences her and tries to coax her to leave without burning his house down).

The ties between the two critical discourses, the Mizrahi and the feminist, surface in an essay titled “Avi be-gil shivi’m ve-tesha” (“My Father at the Age of Seventy-Nine,” 23–31),¹⁴ when Matalon describes sitting in a café with Israeli poet and fiction writer Nurit Zarchi (b. 1941), “who has known me about since I was five years old: we are both from the horrible town Petah Tikva” (*Kro*, 23).¹⁵ The women are approached by a third woman, who wishes to compliment Matalon on her first novel. The passerby confesses that she belongs to the “Israeli Mayflower,” who were reared to despise Mizrahim, and that she began to read Matalon’s fiction motivated by anthropological curiosity but was nevertheless overcome by its literary value, and wanted to relate this to the author. The condescending compliment was greeted with silence until Zarchi spoke to define Matalon’s parents, immigrants from Egypt, as Israeli Mayflower as well, “a different Mayflower, but a Mayflower” (23; the term itself, *Israeli Mayflower*, is a hybrid, importing concepts of white Protestant American history to Israeli Jewish-Ashkenzi terms). The tension in the café scene is created by the clash between “women’s culture” and the conventions of intimate publics,¹⁶ and intimacy between women based on an assumed universal femininity on the one hand. On the other hand, the conflict between ethnicity and class disables the mechanism that glosses over conflicts.

Matalon, not quite sure in the essay if she wants to be endowed with this honor, proceeds to test its meanings on her father. In turning to him, she positions him in comparison to a cultural, possibly matrilineal lineage—beginning either with Zarchi as an authorial mother or with a very different literary and ideological

mother—Egyptian Jewish essayist Jacqueline Kahanoff. Matalon's biological mother does not enter on this occasion into the possible strings of creation of her national, gendered, political, writing self.

The missing father figure is sometimes dominant in his absence in Matalon's work more than the mother's continuous presence. This creates a perpetual tension between the patriarchal and the matrilineal line. Sometimes the absent father clears the way for a family lineage of women, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, and intimate female friendships. Often he shows hollow neglect, as does the girl's father in the short story "Yalda bakafe," who spends his life watching and telling himself that he can "afford the generosity of the gaze" (*Zarim*, 55), but fails to observe the misery of his own daughter's life.

In the essay "Avi be-gil shivi'm ve-tesha," the father is a retired political activist, busy with petty challenges that he poses to his caretakers at his assisted living establishment, and he is amused and pleased by the title, which his daughter relates to ironically. But the questions of ethnic identity, immigration, cultural strata, and social and financial class are central to Matalon's writing. This essay articulates a central vein of her work: "the complicated and desperate dialectic of the Mizrahi voice and the Zionist project: How can one speak, how can the Mizrahim speak not from the exclusive position of the victim, how can a Mizrahi speech which does not carry in its blood circulation the Zionist image of Mizrahim be put forth and can it be done at all?" (*Kro u-khtov*, 24). These questions are explored in her work through the prism of shifting Levantine identities. In her reading of *Ze im ha-panim eleinu*, Gil Hochberg has defined Levantine as "a marker of the instability of identity. Less an identity than a position of ambiguity."¹⁷ This is descriptive of the whole of Matalon's literary project, as it is revealed from different angles in the three articles presented here.

Although Matalon's fiction is perpetually reframing and undermining definitive fixed identities, one character appears in most of her works: the father figure devoted to political activism and protest.¹⁸ He first emerges in the short story "Ḥatuna bamispara" ("A Wedding in the Beauty Parlor"; 1981), bent on delivering his pre-election propaganda speech rather than celebrating his daughter's marriage, and then again in her children's book, *Sipur shemathil be-levaya shel nahash* (A Story Which Begins with a Snake's Funeral; 1989), where the funeral offers an

occasion for a hyperbolic speech, and the daughter prematurely watches her father with forgiveness, as if he were a child himself. He is a main character in *Ze im ha-panim eleinu* and in *Kol tse'adenu* (The Sound of Our Steps; 2008), but the harshest moral judgment perhaps is cast upon him when he appears as a female Ashkenazi character in *Bliss*. Sarah, devoted to political activism and opposition to the horrors of the Israeli occupation, is deemed by the novel to be as morally decayed as her rotten teeth. The altruistic in Matalon's world, be they father or best friend, are devoid of ethical standing because they cannot but betray their nearest and dearest. As Robert's mother says of him in *Ze im ha-panim eleinu*: if a snake had emerged from her belly it would have made a better son (*Ze*, 280). Sarah, like Robert, like Morris of *Kol tse'adenu*, is vulnerable and endearing, inarguably just in her political campaign, and betrays those devoted to her and in need of her, as she passively watches her best friend Ofri being led to the orchard to be raped by Mordekhai, deserts her husband Udi, and beats her helpless child, Mims. Her irresistible charm is matched by helplessness and self-destruction, which as with the father figures infects all those with whom she comes into contact.

Matalon is notably a link in the chain of the great voices within the Israeli literary canon challenging its premises.¹⁹ Not the line stemming from Moshe Shamir, Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, and David Grossman, but the line that can be traced to S. Yizhar and Yehoshua Kenaz. Matalon's writing can be tied directly to Kenaz's work. Her essay about him, "*Hagehenom shel hare'iya*" (Vision's Hell; *Kro*, 179–83), which can be read as a self-analysis, focuses on the gaze as an existential position of inquiry and doubt, and the foundation of narrated identities. The gaze is the trigger of narrative identities both for Kenaz and Matalon, as well as the Achilles' heel of authorial and narrated ethics, because it repeatedly strains, subverts, and cracks the suspension of disbelief necessary for narrative fiction to take off unnoticed. Matalon identifies in Kenaz the gaze as the fundamental ground on which a self can be constructed, and on which its very being is threatened at the same time (*Kro*, 179). This observation is accurately descriptive of her writing as well as it emerges from the three essays before us.

The articles here were originally presented at a symposium held in honor of Ronit Matalon on January 7, 2009, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. They represent three scholars at different stages of their career. As they engage with

Matalon, these articles engulf some of the main concerns of Israeli literary scholarship today: among these are the place of theology and metaphysics in Israeli culture and post-colonial views of Israeli literature, which enable a critical view of the occupation, and ethical, existential philosophical readings. All three regard dynamics of memory, narrative, and trauma. Hannan Hever reads *Ze im ba-panim eleinu* as a novel that “exposes the theological foundations of Hebrew literature as an integral part of the Zionist project.” Reading through Benjamin, Hever views Matalon’s negotiations with photography in this novel as an attempt to reconstruct the metaphysical aura, that is, the revelation lost in the age of mechanical reproduction. The attempt, regardless of its outcome, is heroic. In Hever’s reading of the novel, the destructive clash between the verbal and the visual stirs Israeli identity politics and replaces them with “a politics of location” that enables fluid identities.

By contrast, Shimrit Peled’s reading of the novel, in relation to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, within a post-colonial context, finds that “the recollection, the bringing together of the pictures and their interpretation and the various family stories that accompany them, and the creation of a memoir, make up a novel that creates a new, *nonterritorial* alternative to ‘home’ within a post-colonial reality” (italics mine, T.H.).

Although Hever and Peled would agree that, as Peled puts it, “Matalon teaches us to observe. The task is to look into the heart of darkness, to substantiate the dull, the misunderstood, and the allegory of the darkness, without going blind, ideologically or emotionally,” her conclusion that Matalon’s narration as memoir creates a nonterritorial home diverges distinctly from Hever’s reading. The home and the revelation found in Peled’s and Hever’s readings of *Ze im ba-panim eleinu* are lost and regained in Na’ama Tsal’s reading of Matalon’s latest work, *Kol tse’adenu*. Tsal, too, seeks to go beyond identity politics and finite identities. The home in Tsal’s reading is a fragile site that demands constant affirmation and support. Reading through Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy, Tsal views Matalon’s domesticity in its contradictory make of chaos and stability, fragility and strength. Paradoxically, she shows, Matalon’s secure domesticity manifests itself simultaneously with its lack.

Tsal views “The Sound of Our Steps” as a turning point in Matalon’s work. In a way it is. But there is a deep continuity in all of Matalon’s writing that is also further developed here. The repetition of images, such as the formative image of

the roofless kitchen under renovation that appears in *Ze im ha-panim eleinu*, and is granted an illuminating reading in Tsal's article, or the refigured scene of the father's shocked and pained response to Egypt's loss in the Six Day War in conflict with the mother's Zionist response in both novels, attests to Matalon's dynamics of repetition and revision that enable the continuous flow of destructive and constructive views of the endlessly intricate terrain before her.

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RONIT MATALON'S WORK:

"Madam Rachelle" (*Davar, Masa*, November 30, 1979, first publication).

Sipur she-mat' hil be-levaya shel nahash (1989)

Zarim ba-bayit (1992)

Ze im ha-panim eleinu (The One Facing Us) (1995)

Sarah, Sarah (Bliss) (2000)

Kero u-khetov (2001)

Galut et paneha (2006)

Kol tse'adenu (2008)

NOTES

- 1 Tzipper's original rant was published in *Haaretz* on June 16, 2006. For responses, see the following links: Dan Miron, "Ha-sifrut hi ya'ar im etsim ve-sihim," *Haaretz*, June 23, 2006:

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/ShArtPE.jhtml?itemNo=729728&contrassID=2&subContrassID=5&sbSubContrassID=0>

Galit Hasan-Rokem responded ("Avanim be-veit zkukhit," *Haaretz* June 30, 2006):

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/ShArtPE.jhtml?itemNo=732419&contrassID=2&subContrassID=5&sbSubContrassID=0>

And Chana Kronfeld's response: ("*Ma kol kakh hirgiz et ha-mimsad ha-sifrut*") *Haaretz* July 12, 2006) <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/ShArtPE.jhtml?itemNo=736722&contrassID=2&subContrassID=12&sbSubContrassID=0>

- 2 Gil Hochberg, “Permanent Immigration: Jacqueline Kahanoff, Ronit Matalon and the Impetus of Levantinism,” *Boundary 2*, 31, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 219–43, and her book, *In Spite of Partition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 70–72.
- 3 Deborah Starr, *Remembering Cosmopolitan Egypt: Literature, Culture, and Empire* (London: Routledge, 2009), 134–46.
- 4 Nissim Kalderon, “Lo hakol sipur ehad: al ‘ze im ha-panim eleinu’ shel Ronit Matalon,” *Rehov 2* (1995), 48–59.
- 5 Avner Holtzman, “Berosh gadol,” in *Mapat drakhim* (Tel-Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Hame’uchad, 2005), 151–53, first radio broadcast in 1995.
- 6 In an unpublished conference paper, “Photography and Memory in Ronit Matalon’s *The One Facing Us* and W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*,” Mann compares the narrative function of photographs in Matalon with the same device in the novels of W. G. Sebald; NAPH conference, Stanford University, June 2005.
- 7 Batya Gur, “Lekhi tikhbeshi et ha-alam ya Ester, tari’ lahem,” *Ha’arets*, April 28, 1995.
- 8 Ronit Matalon, *Sarab, Sarab* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000). The book was translated by Jessica Cohen, and titled *Bliss* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2003).
- 9 Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1989] 1995).
- 10 Hochberg, 230.
- 11 *Bliss*, 32.
- 12 For an early reference to Matalon’s language, see Hannan Hever and Moshe Ron, “‘Be-gova ha-einayim’: al sipura shel Ronit Matalon ‘Aḥ katan,’” *Siman kri’a 19* (March 1986), 15–16.
- 13 For a reading of Matalon within a feminist Israeli literary context, see Chana Kronfeld’s illuminating reading of the story *Galut et paneha*, in Kronfeld, “Ma Kol.”
- 14 *Kero u-khetov*, 23–31.
- 15 This is a conspicuous statement in itself, since it loosely fits neither of the two authors. Matalon has written extensively about the difference between Ganey Tikva—the deprived neighborhood/former transition camp where she grew up—and the town of Petah Tikva, whereas Zarchi was born in Jerusalem and spent the formative years of her childhood as an outsider in Kibbutz Geva.

- 16 Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.
- 17 *In Spite of Partition*, 72.
- 18 Matti Shemuelof has compared the father figure in Matalon's autobiographical essays to that of her fiction; see "Hadialektika be-itsuv dmut ha-av bi-shtey yetsirot shel Ronit Matalon," *Apirion* 110 (2009): 9–13.
- 19 Hannan Hever chose to conclude his revised history of modern Hebrew fiction, in *Ha-Sipur ve-hale'om* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), with a chapter on Matalon. See *Ha-Sipur*, 329–43.

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