

החופש ליצור: האמנית והעולם ביצירתה של רות אלמג (The Freedom to Write: the Woman-Artist and the world in Ruth Almog's Fiction). By Rachel Feldhay Brenner. Migdarim (genders). Pp. 215. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2008. Paper.

In the spring of 2008, University College London in conjunction with Ben Guirion University and Heksherim Institute for Jewish and Israeli Culture and Literature hosted an international conference devoted to the life and work of Ruth Almog. For two days, the literary world of one of the most fascinating writers in Israel today was revealed. Rachel Feldhay Brenner opened the conference with a discussion of the role of the female protagonist as an artist, which, she argues, is the underlying theme throughout Almog's fiction.

In her book-long study of Almog, published in Hebrew the same year, Feldhay Brenner achieves in showing how the forging of the identity of a female artist informs and shapes Almog's imagination. Moving beyond the traditional reading of Almog as a female writer, and of her works as lyrical and romantic, intimate and thus limited to the familiar domestic setting of women's lives, Feldhay Brenner argues that Almog's protagonists, as well as her works of fiction, are politically involved and offer a counter narrative to the normative, masculine, militarist Israeli voice. To trace the development of the female artist in Almog's fiction, Feldhay Brenner follows Julia Kristeva's theory of the place of the semiotic and the logos in the creation of the artists, and supports her readings with the psychology of the artist as formulated by Otto Rank, both theories briefly and clearly explained in her introduction.

The book consists of four thematic sections, each with a short and clear preface, leading to a detailed and close reading of a selection of Almog's prose. The first section, "The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl" looks at Almog's presentation of young women and at the first steps of her adult female protagonists in finding their artistic vocation. The second section looks at Almog's two novels that deal directly with the Holocaust: *The Exile* (1971) and *The Inner Lake* (2000). Here, too, the focus is on the female artist and the meaning or futility of art in a reality dominated by hatred and cruelty. By insisting on the role of women artists in both these novels, Feldhay Brenner offers an original, compelling, and intricate reading of Almog's first novel. She also takes her readers into the world of Almog's experimental book, *The Inner Lake*, where a listing of narratives and facts about swans and peacocks incorporates also the fictional lives and interactions of three women, victims of the tragic history of the Jewish people that reached its horrific climax in the Holocaust.

The third section examines Almog's more philosophical works and looks at how the tension between determinism and individual freedom is played out in the worlds of Almog's fictional artists. The concluding section, "Artistic Mending: The Young Artist in Search of Redemption," is devoted to the short stories and novella published in the collection *Invisible Mending* (1993), set in Israel in the 1940s and 1950s with children or young adults as the protagonists. Here the protagonists, the budding, but sometime silenced, artists, are not only women, but they all share the need to find "mending" for a childhood that has been damaged by recent history, by traumatized or missing parents, and by the lack of a home. And this break can be fixed by the "magic" of creativity that transcends reality and offers redemption.

Feldhay Brenner links Almog's stories and novels over periods and genres, reading them all as variation on a theme. Almog's work allows for such a comprehensive reading, as there are links and references between the works, with the recurrence of names and characters and parallel plots. At times, Feldhay Brenner seems to read against the literary texts, or overlook other possible meanings (as when she states that a walking stick is not a phallic symbol [p. 35] or that both the father and the lover in *The Exile* represent the unloving Israeli society who mistreated Holocaust survivors [pp. 109–110], though they too are victims of this treatment). However, the insistence on the development of the female artist at the heart of the entire corpus is illuminating and convincing.

Almog's artists look for models, sources of inspiration, "father-creator" figures, and one of the things Feldhay Brenner highlights is the rich intertextuality and cultural references in Almog's writings. These cross languages, cultures, religions, and gender. The missing father, a recurring problem in Almog's fiction, is often replaced by an artistic creator figure (who can be equally male or female, as Feldhay Brenner explains on pp. 55, 76, and elsewhere), and when a fruitful relationship develops with such a source of inspiration, the protagonists achieve in finding and forging their own creative identity. For over forty years, Ruth Almog contributes a weekly column to *Haaretz* Culture and Literature supplement, reviewing world literature. Her familiarity with and sensitivity toward literatures from elsewhere is reflected in the rich intertextuality of her fiction, but also highlights the local context of her works, which engage directly with Israel past and present. Throughout her study, Feldhay Brenner shows how politically and socially engaged is Almog's writing, where the female artists' struggle for recognition is due to the militaristic nature of Israeli society and culture. This can be found for example in the title of her short story, "With that Money One Could Have Bought a Canon—1969" (from the collection *Marguereta's Night Grace*, 1969), which in the story refers to literary grants. And in the same story, the speaker complains that in this country

“there is no time [for luxuries, i.e., art and beauty]. One needs to listen to the news” (quoted in Feldhay Brenner, p. 51).

With the guidance of Feldhay Brenner who brings Almog’s stories into the heart of contemporary Israeli literature, the Israeli reading public can now enjoy these “luxuries” as a necessary counterpart to the news. And perhaps the growing critical interest in and recognition of Ruth Almog as a unique, yet central voice in contemporary Israeli literature, will see more of her works available in translation for a wider readership.

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