

The Gender Question in Yiddish Literary Tradition

Helena Goodman BA English Literature and Jewish Studies

Supervised by Esther Frank

Objective:

- My objective was to look at Yiddish female poets and their poetry through three lenses through: their status in the eyes of their male counterparts, through their own self-perception as female or non gendered writers and lastly, through possible thematic ties in a female literary tradition. I focused on two scholars who work extensively in Yiddish Literature: Avraham Novershtern of Tel Aviv, and Kathryn Hellerstein of University of Pennsylvania.
- An unanswered question: How do the works of these scholars shape the way we view these women poets?

S=sources used:

- Hellerstein, Kathryn. "A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish." In Handbook of American Jewish Literature, edited by Lewis Fried, 195–237. New York: 1988
- Margolin, Anna. Poems. With an introduction by Abraham Novershtern. Jerusalem: 1991
- Molodowsky, Kadya. Paper Bridges: Selected Poems. Translated, introduced and edited by Kathryn Hellerstein. Detroit: 1999
- Avraham Novershtern, "The Voices and the Choir: Yiddish Women's Poetry in the Interwar Period.
- Avraham Novershtern, "Here Dwells the Jewish People"

1. How did male writers view female poets?

- Novershtern: He refutes the idea that women poets were stifled or marginalized in the early formation of modern Yiddish Literature.
- He argues that their poetry was well and positively received, and that women poets contributed to the "variegated nature of the national literature and culture even though its actual dimensions were most modest and limited.
- Hellerstein: She negates his notion that women were not at all submerged literary voices and provides evidence that they were not completely accepted by male Yiddish writers.

2. How did these poets view themselves?

Novershtern argues that women did not view themselves as writing as "women writers" or within the context of their gender and were more interested in radical politics and modernism than gender.

Hellerstein contradicts Novershtern, saying that letters between women poets exposes how many of them felt solidarity towards each other in a categorization of gender and their status as women writers in a larger literary context. These women did not only write about being women, but they did repeatedly return to the experience of being female and what it was like expressing that experience in Yiddish.

3. Is there a tradition for women writing in Yiddish?

For the most part, Novershtern argues that women wrote more out of a social and political context than out of an engendered one.

Hellerstein traces themes throughout the poetry that point towards a thematic trend distinct to the women's writing in Yiddish. She writes, "**The category of gender is not an end in itself. Instead the key question is: what were the many different ways to write about Jewish women's experiences?**"

These different ways point to a literary tradition of women writing of their experiences as Jewish women and as Yiddish writers.

אנה מרגולין



צילה דראפקין

