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The Feminine Sphere of Yiddish Heritage

Review of the book: Joanna Lisek (2018),
Kol isze – głos kobiet w poezji jidysz (od XVI w. do 1939 r.).
Sejny: Wydawnictwo Pogranicze.

Abstract

The review presents the monograph *Kol isze – głos kobiet w poezji jidysz (od XVI w. do 1939 r.)* [Kol ishe: The Voice of Women in Yiddish Poetry (from the 16th Century to 1939)], published in 2018 by Joanna Lisek. The article focuses on the main topic of the monograph – the literary voices of women within Yiddish culture – and its historical, social and literary framework.

Key words: Jewish women's history, Yiddish culture, herstory of literature, women's poetry, female subjectivity, women's biographies.

The history of Jewish women, a research subject that has been growing in popularity since the 1990s,¹ has recently also become a field of in-

¹ See e.g. Baskin, 1991; Davidman & Tenenbaum, 1994. Researchers' interests go deeper and deeper into the past, as exemplified by Susan Ackerman's studies on the history of ancient Israel. Among other things, Ackerman analyzes the reasons and circumstances surrounding the appearance of women prophets in the Hebrew Bible (see Ackerman, 2002).

depth interest and solid study in Poland (see e.g. Koch & Taczyńska, 2018; Lisek, 2010; Nikliborc, 2010; Stöcker-Sobelman, 2012; Ubertowska, 2009). The inclusion of women's past in historical narrative – although their role seems obvious, it is still worth pointing out – cannot be relegated to a footnote in a history book; instead, their experiences should form the basis for analyzing the main social, political, economic and cultural events, and become part of the history recorded in textbooks (Scott, 1986). Historical analysis using the *gender* category rejects men's experience as historically normative and the only valid narrative, because such an approach assumes that society and social relations are largely organized on the basis of gender categories. Therefore, to fully look at various aspects of the past, research should take into account the experiences of both women and men. Conceptualizing the historical community of women in this perspective can be an integral part of transformative historiography (Rosman, 2011, p. 193). The interpretation of the past contained in a coherent story will explain what the multidimensional presence of women was like in the past and why it took those particular forms.

Especially in the Orthodox Jewish tradition, women's activities, although necessary, were not very prestigious and were often limited to the role of wife and mother. Women who went beyond the limits of their functions could not count on the support of the rather women-unfriendly heritage of Judaism. On the one hand, it is not surprising that women were more eager to assimilate and acculturate than men. As Eugenia Prokop-Janiec notes, it has been something of a rule that in modern multilingual Jewish literature and its individual language zones, Jewish women writers usually began writing in the so-called third language of modern Jewish culture, i.e. one of the European languages (Prokop-Janiec, 2013, p. 139). On the other hand, as Bożena Keff wrote, looking at the past through a researcher's eyes, it is no wonder that the gender or feminist approach to the patriarchal Jewish tradition can be very critical (Keff, 2011, p. 377).

The focus of this review is the monograph *Kol isze – głos kobiet w poezji jidysz (od XVI w. do 1939 r.)* [Kol ishe: the Voice of Women in Yiddish Poetry (from the 16th Century to 1939)], published in 2018 by the Wrocław-based literary scholar, researcher and translator Joanna Lisek. The author of this extensive publication (beautifully published and richly illustrated) took the effort to show the gradual literary emancipation of women that took place within the constraints of Yiddish culture. The feminine sphere of Yiddish heritage, as we read in the Introduction, "is still not taken into account enough, even by feminist researchers" (Lisek, 2018, p. 16). Women who wrote in Yiddish and lived in a diaspora were burdened with the stigma of triple marginalization: as representatives of the national and religious minority, as

women functioning in the patriarchal system, and as authors writing in the non-prestigious Yiddish language. It is worth remembering that Yiddish was the language which was spoken by 12 million people before World War II, and which for a long time was considered just a jargon, the lowest in the hierarchy. It was associated mainly with everyday life and contemptuously called the language of women. Today Yiddish is a language assigned to the sphere of oblivion and rejection, and its functioning is connected with the (lost) past. In this context, Lisek points out that while men could receive an education that would enable them to study the holy books (in Hebrew and Aramaic) and would provide Jewish males with specific cultural tools, women found their creative space in those non-prestigious, vernacular languages: Yiddish and Ladino (Lisek, 2018, p. 17). As a language “open to various influences, far from homogenization and aspirations to speak with the authoritarian voice of the elites,” Yiddish created friendly conditions for the creative activity of women (Lisek, 2018, p. 51). It should be added that this monograph is by no means Lisek’s first project aimed at saving the Jewish Yiddish heritage of women from oblivion. It follows the book *Mute Souls? Women in Yiddish Culture* published in 2010 (of which she was an editor), which analyzes the image of Yiddish culture in many aspects, taking into account the gender perspective (see Lisek, 2010).

Although women appear marginally in the mainstream sources on which historical narrative is often based, their presence in the past is visible and audible. The participation of women in the past, their voice, traced and reconstructed by Lisek within Yiddish culture, has been metaphorically expressed in the monograph’s title. The term *kol ishe*, meaning “women’s voice,” refers the reader to Jewish law, which regulates the audibility of that voice. Orthodox Judaism based on rabbinical interpretation forbade a man praying or studying the Torah to hear the voice of a singing woman, as a woman’s voice was thought to have a strong erotic effect. Yet the biblical text does not impose such restrictions; on the contrary, women could participate in the celebration of certain events. Derived from Jewish law, the term *kol ishe* refers to both the presence of this voice and its suppression. The tension arising from this opposition of audibility and silence should be read as an illustration of the birth and development of women’s poetry in Yiddish. All the more so because – as Lisek writes – the discussion on how to strictly comply with the ban on *kol ishe* is still ongoing. Sometimes the law related to *kol ishe* is politicized. Lisek recalls the case of the silencing (even with the use of force) of the activists of the organization Neshot HaKotel (“Women of the Wall”), who are fighting for women’s right to pray at the Western Wall, including singing and reading the Torah aloud (Lisek, 2018, pp. 20–21).

Although Lisek focuses on the poetic dimension of Yiddish literature, she definitely goes outside its boundaries. Her book is an attempt to comprehensively capture the voices of women from Yiddish culture. The author discovers or recalls the (suppressed and silenced) female voices and presents them not in isolation but against the backdrop of the specific conditions of Jewish culture, which she discusses in detail in the monograph. On the one hand, it is a diachronic story, a study of the history of literature, in which the herstorical part occupies an important, inalienable position. On the other hand, Lisek looks at the process of isolating female subjectivity, studying specific cases of developing a strategy of poetic expression. A very important element of these analyses is recreating the biographical history of women, both at the factual level and as constructs functioning in a culturally defined way. Women's biographies clearly show that we can find some common elements in the choir of female voices as well as many individual features which often have a decisive influence on the choice of one's creative path. The other side of this relationship with language also seems very interesting; it is the phenomenon of opening the Yiddish language space to feminine subjectivity. In my opinion, the research perspective adopted by Lisek is very important. Undoubtedly, the subjectivity of women writers and their cultural uniqueness play the most important role in the monograph and form the foundation of the narrative. However, Lisek also talks about the impact of her research on her own subjectivity. We see a special kind of influence – reciprocity and intersubjectivity – between the Jewish women and the author of the monograph. I read this intimate declaration of the researcher's fascination and (re)definition of her subjectivity as a clear gesture indicating the permanence and closeness of the content of the female poetry being discussed. To me this is a clear reflection of the contemporary relevance and impact of this poetry.

The monograph is divided into two main parts, which in turn contain many chapters and subsections. The first part presents the position of women in old Yiddish literature from the 13th to the 18th century, the second part presents poets in modern Yiddish literature. Let us take a closer look at the first part. In this section, Lisek goes back to the roots of literature, recreates female literary genealogy – its thematic and formal foundations, and discusses the possibilities and limitations of women's writing at the time. We get to know the first readers, who bought popular booklets called *bichlech* from itinerant peddlers every week; these booklets existed in opposition to the prestigious *sforim*, i.e. books written in Hebrew and Aramaic. As Lisek writes, the role of women as readers grew steadily, so 18th-century women constituted a very important group of recipients of printed Jewish books. The dissemination of texts printed in Yiddish

became the basis for a revolution in Jewish reading, as the readership started to include women as well. From that moment on, women, whose earlier reading was mostly limited to *Cene-rene*, the 16th-century women's Bible, and to knightly and Jewish romances, also became supporters of contemporary literature, and finally began to write themselves. Lisek points out that many works of Yiddish literature for women as well as those created by women have not survived, as they functioned outside the canon of literature and on the margins of male authors' works. Sometimes we learn about women's activities (they worked as translators, scribes and typesetters) only by reading an introduction or an afterword. It should be noted that in the first part of the monograph, Lisek analyzes not only religious texts but also folk songs in which the pattern of female poetic expression has survived and was reproduced. Subsequent generations of women's authors, writers creating in the 20th century, would return to these models of utterance. In this brief reflection on the monograph, it is impossible to list all the names unearthed by Lisek, but let us single out Rywka Tiktiner, one of the first Yiddish poets about whom some information has been preserved. Tiktiner was a 16th-century preacher and writer. Above all, she was the author of a book published posthumously in 1609 (by Gerszom ben Bezazel, a member of a well-known family of printers) under the title *Mejnekes Riwke* [Rebecca the Feeder]. The work is a moralizing guide for women, characterized by an elaborate form and thoughtful composition; it is probably a record of sermons previously delivered by Tiktiner on the subject of the wisdom of the woman's body and soul, divided into seven fundamentals and covering relations with the family (husband, parents, parents-in-law, daughter-in-law and others) or raising children. A positive image of femininity emerges from the guide, unifying spiritual and bodily elements. The division into seven parts refers to a quote from the Book of Proverbs about a house standing on seven pillars (Proverbs 9:1). Tiktiner reads this passage from the Bible as follows: the house is built by a woman's wisdom and is based on seven pillars of behavior towards God and individual family members. Tiktiner uplifts the everyday activities of women, showing that they are important for the condition of all the people of Israel.

The second part of the monograph, as mentioned above, presents poets in modern Yiddish literature. Two changes mark the border between old and modern Yiddish literature: transformations in style and differences in ideological attitudes, and the fact that the major centers of literature development shifted from Western Europe to the East. Lisek shows that although the 19th century is almost universally considered a period of women's becoming active in the public sphere, the era of Jewish enlightenment did not bring about any significant change in the inclusion

of Jewish women. A significant turn came later and was influenced by the egalitarian, popular Yiddish literature used to propagate the Haskalah idea, so often addressed to women. Lisek divides the period of modern literature into two stages. The first one covers the years 1888–1918 and is divided into several subperiods, marked by subsequent waves of literary debuts. On this basis, the monograph’s author discusses the gradually developing strategies of female expression: from imitation (Roza Goldsztejn), through camouflage (e.g. Zelda Kniznik, Perl Prylucka), to attempts to speak with woman’s own voice (the groundbreaking role of Jehudis/Rachel Bernsztejn). The second stage of that period, which Lisek calls the “golden age of women’s Yiddish poetry,” falls between the years 1918 and 1939, which was a time of dynamic and fruitful (sometimes even subversive) changes in Yiddish culture in general. During this time, women’s poetry became a phenomenon noticed and commented upon in Yiddish literature. In this section, readers are given an in-depth presentation of a wide range of figures, from the poets most recognizable today (including Kadia Mołodowska, Celia Dropkin and Debora Vogel) to less well-known or forgotten writers (e.g. Fradel Sztok, Bronia Baum and Chasia Kuperman). At the time, in 1928, Ezra Korman compiled an important anthology, *Jidisze dichterins*, which presented the work of 70 women poets. The category that organizes the material from this period is the map of the largest centers of Yiddish: Łódź, Warsaw and Galicia (Poland), New York (USA) and Kharkov, Kiev and Moscow (Eastern Europe). The spatial (horizontal and vertical) arrangement demonstrates the center-periphery relationship and various femininity models, and emphasizes the existence of multiple aspects and influences in women’s poetry, including tradition, the moral revolution and the radicalization of attitudes.

In conclusion, I consider Lisek’s contribution to be very important and necessary, both within the research area itself (the history of Jewish women), which the author expands significantly, and from the perspective of the great theoretical and methodological toolkit that the author uses. Lisek has perfectly control over the vast material, which she interprets in a nuanced way, making this comprehensive analysis very impressive. Discussing the monograph *Kol isze*, it is impossible not to mention another Yiddish-and-gender project in which Lisek was involved: the anthology *Moja dzika koza* [My Wild Goat], published in 2018 (see Szymaniak et al., 2018) and focused on the work of women poets writing in Yiddish. The poetry included in the collection can be regarded as strong and still relevant testimony to the hardships of literary emancipation, discussed so thoroughly and panoramically in *Kol isze*. Both publications are independent ventures, but they complement each other very well.

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Kobieca sfera dziedzictwa jidysz

Celem recenzji jest prezentacja wydanej w 2018 r. monografii Joanny Lisek *Kol isze – głos kobiet w poezji jidysz (od XVI w. do 1939 r.)*. Omówienie koncentruje się na głównym temacie publikacji – literackich głosach kobiet z kręgu kultury jidysz – oraz jego historycznych, społecznych i literackich ramach.

Słowa kluczowe: historia Żydówek, kultura jidysz, herstoria literatury, poezja kobiet, podmiotowość kobieca, biografie kobiet.

Note

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