



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

Ruth Kark, Margalit Shilo, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Shulamit Reinharz

Published by Brandeis University Press

Kark, Ruth, et al.

Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel: Life History, Politics, and Culture.

Brandeis University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/15689](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15689).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15689>

## Nehama Puhachewsky

### *The Alibi of the Arbitrary*

Nehama Puhachewsky (1869–1934) played an active role in the public life of the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine (the *Yishuv*), and especially in the life of its women.<sup>1</sup> She contributed to the community’s social and intellectual life, not least through her opinions about women’s place within the settlement endeavor.<sup>2</sup> Her work (more essays than stories) deals explicitly with the national Zionist project. The female characters in her stories suggest how Puhachewsky experienced female life in the *Yishuv*: On the one hand, women were equal partners in the work, in the very “building of the land”; at the same time, however, they were excluded from real partnership in the community’s daily affairs, its intellectual life, and its decision-making processes. In that sense, her stories are unique in placing women and female experience at the center of the narrative, thus creating a space in which they can be active and heard.

Most of the criticism and research devoted to Puhachewsky’s stories, however, has focused on their Zionist and settlement-related contexts to appropriate them into the Hebrew literary canon, turning these contexts into the stories’ main concern. Such readings, which view the stories’ critique of some aspects of the Zionist endeavor, raised through the female protagonists’ life, as part of a uniform national Zionist position, subordinates the female subject and female experience to something that is greater than them, but in which they ultimately do not share, and the critique has been read as general, rather than gendered, criticism.

The basic ideological positions of modernist nationalism do not allow the inclusion of women except as representations of something else — “nation,” “land,” or “the universal.” Puhachewsky’s stories, then, even when they are recognized as voicing criticism, especially of women’s status, remain, within

this canonical reading, faithful to the formation of modern national ideals, and hence can be included in the national literary canon. Within these ideals, the national endeavor is perceived from the start as precluding the participation of women, since they do not share in fighting, policymaking, financing, and organizing the modern apparatuses of national governance.

Yet Puhachewsky's stories also can be subjected to a different reading. In order to focus on a female experience capable of striking a path into the modern national-Zionist project, it can be argued, these stories not only voice the canonical critique, but add another, subversive critical trajectory — or, rather, they make possible a subversive reading that uses their own materials to suggest, as a subversive act, an alternative to the construction of a female national subject, one which is not only a symbol of something else.

In his vast and important account of Hebrew literature's evolution, Gershon Shaked catalogues Nehama Puhachewsky's work as realist-actualist fiction, a genre within which she "offers many melodramatic 'victim' stories" intended to "arouse pity and elicit tears."<sup>3</sup> In his brief summary of Puhachewsky's oeuvre, to demonstrate his theory that "Zionist ideology alone is a source of salvation and a source of hope," Shaked quotes from the story "*Bil'adeah*" (Without Her): "The weak institutions of today will grow stronger, and the need to increase the redemption of the land will seep bit by bit into all hearts. And finally the entire people of Israel will throng, rejected from without and attracted from within, to its only source of vitality, where it can still be saved from spiritual and physical annihilation" (p. 85).<sup>4</sup>

But the story "*Bil'adeah*" does not end with the promise of redemption; nor does its conclusion reaffirm and validate the hope and salvation inherent in the Zionist ideology, as Shaked would have it. Rather, the story ends with both husband and wife leaving the country. Yechezkel and Yehudit Weinholz live in a *moshavah* (agricultural settlement) and take care of their farm; they have no children, and Yehudit is seriously ill. Her illness does not keep her from cultivating her garden and performing her other chores. But finally, after a particularly bad night, she realizes that she has no choice. Regardless of her deep desire to remain in the country and on her farm, she must go to Vienna for surgical treatment. Weinholz takes over some of her tasks, writes her letters, and ponders his place in the world. Meanwhile, Yehudit, despite a successful operation, dies suddenly in that foreign land. Weinholz, who by all accounts in the story runs a successful farm and lives in harmonious collaboration with his surroundings, sells his property and leaves the country.

The terrible pain of leaving her land almost kills Yehudit, and perhaps it

is indeed what ultimately kills her; Yechezkel, by contrast, leaves even though his farm is successful and he “sits in a fine house enjoying a great abundance” (p. 79). Moreover, “*Bil’adeah*” is not critical of the couple’s leaving: the “melodramatic” aspect of the narrative of victimhood — Yehudit falling ill and dying, and the anguished husband who cannot bear life in the country without her — leaves no room for doubt: This is not a story encouraging immigration (*aliyah*) to Eretz Israel. As Nurit Govrin argues, “The futility of living without the beloved is the central motif of the story ‘*Bil’adeah*,’ as its name [‘without her’] suggests . . . In Yechezkel Weinholz’s struggle between his personal problems (his wife’s illness and the lack of offspring) and his sense of the homeland (work, the farm and the ideal), the personal side triumphs; as it turns out, redeeming the land, the path of the many, is not enough to outweigh ‘the love of a woman and the passion for sons,’ the path of the individual.”<sup>5</sup>

It is in this depiction of the difficulties and actual crisis encountered while realizing the Zionist dream that Yaffa Berlovitz locates Puhachewsky’s protest. The author, she argues, does not share the naiveté of other writers of Zionist literature from the First Aliyah: “Not only did the texts not contain naïve expression, but their distinguishing feature is a harsh and painful awakening from that preliminary naiveté.”<sup>6</sup> Defining Puhachewsky’s work as a “melancholy” (and not, as Shaked suggests, as “melodrama”), Berlovitz suggests that the sources of the rupture should be sought in “three states of conditioning that might lead to melancholy,” the first of which might befit the story “*Bil’adeah*”: “The arbitrariness of human existence. This sense of arbitrariness, of the meaningless nature of human existence, dominates Puhachewsky’s stories, especially when the calamities suffered by the protagonists are not a result of the unfolding plot, but rather come raining down out of nowhere.”<sup>7</sup>

But what, exactly, does Puhachewsky indicate as an awakening? The arbitrary world does make Yehudit ill and then, after her successful surgery, causes her death, but this arbitrariness does not provide — in the story — a sufficient explanation for Yechezkel Weinholz’s decision to abandon the country. At some point, albeit in a different context, Yechezkel even comes to think that “Life without her is not as difficult as he had envisioned.” And since the story attests not only to faith in the Zionist enterprise but also to its success (children are born and grow up, hired laborers become land-owning farmers, the collective resolves its problems as a heterogeneous community, Weinholz lives in prosperity), it raises the question: Can the death of a single woman, beloved though she might be, outweigh all that Zionist faith, success, and ardor?

Indeed, it is not only the loss of his wife that pushes Yechezkel to despair: “What does a man leave behind? . . . Creative people — writers and artists leave a name for themselves and a legacy in their works. But what might a man like himself leave behind, a man who will not create new worlds? A simple, earthly man has only one ‘immortality of the soul,’ and there alone hides the secret of life’s continuation: sons, sons! . . . And he — he will walk childless all his days if Yehudit does not return to him safe and sound . . .” (p. 84). After all, “Why and for whom does he toil this way? Who will cherish his efforts? Who will carry on his work? Who will watch over all that he has nurtured when he dies?” (p. 80).

Yechezkel Weinholz, the story’s almost sole focalizer, does not blame his beloved wife for leaving and dying overseas. She did not even want to go to Vienna for treatment; instead, she “suffered and worked and said nothing,” until he forced her to go “after a great battle” (p. 80). But the causal structure of the story nevertheless identifies Yehudit as the “guilty” party: her illness and death deprive Weinholz of a wife and offspring, the lack of which, in Weinholz’s eyes, empties the entire Zionist endeavor of its meaning. The long catalogue of homeland, land, house, garden, field, *moshavah*, work, and ideals does not compensate for the lack of succession. Continuity will not be found in the farming and building shared by the entire Jewish community in Zion; it can only come from private, personal procreation, for which Yechezkel needs a wife. Yehudit’s incompatibility with Zionism’s agricultural fulfillment is strengthened in the story by an analogy between her and the cows on the farm (whose care is part of Yehudit’s chores): just as she wakes Yechezkel in the middle of the night, so he is awakened in the middle of the night by the thought of the “grass for the cows” that will “spoil by tomorrow if he does not feed it to the cows immediately” (p. 88). But whereas Yehudit wakes him terrified of dying, sends him running for the doctor, and later that night finally breaks down and agrees to go to Vienna, from which she will never return, leaving him childless — by contrast “the brown cow’s udders are filling up! She will probably calve on Passover Eve! [ . . . ] And the ‘gay one’ — how pretty she has grown, eating the grass! And also the ‘short one’, firstborn daughter of ‘stubborn one,’ has more milk!” (p. 88).

Accompanying this unpleasant analogy between cow and woman is Weinholz’s treatment of his wife as if she were a child. “But this is childishness!” (p. 82) he scolds Yehudit for refusing to go to Vienna; and he is filled with joy when he thinks of the letter that “will bring him happy tidings from

his sweet girl” (pp. 86–87), whose eyes are “large, childish, sad” (p. 82) and to whom he is “her old man” (p. 87). Even Yehudit’s private thoughts are not safe from the adult’s penetrating eye: “Sea breezes whisper between their leaves-needles and tell me the secrets and dreams of my Yehudit . . .” he writes to her (p. 87).

Yehudit’s “childishness” fits her incompatibility with the life she so loves. After her departure, Weinholz discovers that “Life without her is not as difficult as he had envisioned. A bit of caretaking in the morning and in the evening was a small matter” (pp. 87–88). Although it is “unpleasant work,” he need only “boil the milk” (p. 87), which he later takes to drinking cold (p. 86), and he eats his lunches “in the laborers’ kitchen” (p. 79). Eventually, it is no longer clear what exactly was all that hard work that so exhausted Yehudit. Only the garden still awaits her return: “It is forlorn without you, dear! Around the flowers many weeds have sprung up, waiting for your little hoe and your soft, delicate hands!” (p. 87). The little hoe—presumably the same one picked up later, when Yehudit is about to return, by the “little Arab” who “hoes all day long in the vegetable garden and flower patch” (pp. 87–88)—and the soft, delicate hands are apparently unsuitable for the life demanded by this land. The analogy between Yehudit and the garden constructs another analogy, between her and “those simple flowers, which he often longs to replace with others, of the finer species, but cannot, because the good species require water—and there is none” (p. 87). Like the flowers, Yehudit, too, is of a fine species, but this waterless land is not yet ready to welcome anything fine: “‘Oh, pipes, pipes!’—groans Weinholz. How happy he would be if this improvement had already come to the moshavah!” (p. 87).<sup>8</sup>

Yehudit’s (arbitrary) illness is linked to stereotypical feminine traits (tenderness, childishness), and together these render her unsuitable for life in Eretz Israel. The Zionist ethos, which identifies foreign lands (the Diaspora) with illness and death and experiences this exile as exerting a powerful grip, so that only a revolutionary, even violent act of self-extrication (from one’s family, from the past) can release from its clasp and bring healing and health, is not enough to save Yehudit. Her life in Zion, her tilling of the soil, and her strong conviction that she can only live on her own land—none of these buy her entrance into the narrative, which in this story is “written” by Yechezkel. Her presence in the narrative is limited to two functions: she can serve as a symbol of the disease of diasporic life, and of the poverty of the land (which lacks water for fine flowers)—or she can provide narrative continuity in the form of sons, in the fulfillment of love and desire not

only through the national narratological genealogy (the passion for Zion, the love of the land, and the physical merging with it) but through a private, familial, dynastic genealogy. Yehudit's entrance into the narrative of national-Zionist liberation is dependent on her ability to endow the private aspect of Yechezkel's life with meaning. She has no share in the national public sphere or Yechezkel's public life, which the story repeatedly characterizes as successful, fulfilling, perfectly proper: fertile land, a well-appointed home, community involvement and stature, and control of the Arab "other" (the "little" one who works in the garden, Mahmoud leading the horse, and the "two Arab women washing, doing laundry and scrubbing" [p. 87]).

The boundaries of the Zionist space are delineated with precision: from the catalogue cited above, through the Zionist speech (quoted by Shaked), to detailed descriptions of a farmer's life. But Zionist space is demarcated mainly through exclusions: the exclusion of the Arab, who is subordinated to service tasks, some of them feminine (which he performs in Yehudit's absence), others performed on the soil and horse of a Jew; and the exclusion of the two women mentioned in the story, whose occupations are limited to housework, gardening, listening to the men's Zionist speeches, and marrying land-purchasing husbands. The women are not partners of equal ability in the main Zionist effort — tilling the soil and inhabiting the land. And when there is no exclusion, there is a hierarchical distinction between the "owner of the land" and the "foreigner" who comes to join: "From the south came Yemenites — pitiful people, barefoot, wild-haired, without coats and almost without tunics. Their flesh wrapped in rags, prayer shawls on their shoulders. Their looks are strange and alien, yet they speak Hebrew and praise their brethren and 'Ha-Shem' ['the Lord'] for their salvation and the redemption of their souls, for leaving an impure land and coming to a pure and holy one . . . And the northern ship also disembarked sons returning to their father's table. Young men came — thirty heroes, fresh and vigorous lads. And who can imagine his joy [that of Wienholz visiting Jaffa] at the splendid sight, when north meets south! The same wind gathered them all and brought them here, brought them to build and create . . ." (pp. 83–84). Although north and south are analogous and have gathered to build and create together, the southerners have a "strange and foreign" look, and only the Hebrew they speak makes them acceptable; there are even quotation marks around their belief that "Ha-Shem" helped them to come here. Meanwhile, the new arrivals from the north are called sons returning to their father's homes, as if they were the true sons of this land: heroes, fresh, young and vigorous, so different from those pitiful, barefoot, wild-haired Yemenites, in

their patched clothes and prayer shawls, which distance them from the secular-Zionist home that is their salvation — Zionism, not “Ha-Shem.”

The acts of exclusion and hierarchical labeling keep the ownership of the Zionist narrative, the “right” to tell this narrative, in the hands of he who has appropriated both the physical space and its space of images — Weinholz. Yehudit, his wife, is thus relegated to the same periphery as all the non-robust, non-fieldworking, non-wealthy (in this story, the bourgeoisie — usually hated by the ruling socialist Zionist narrative — is partially included in the Zionist space by virtue of the capital it invests in the land). Like them, her grasp on the land is partial, temporary, in the service of others. Like them, she is constructed in the story as non-central — as what is not an Ashkenazi Jewish man. The function of Yehudit’s story is not to construct an independent and sovereign subject, but to present a foil or image for the central Zionist story. The excluded woman marks the boundary through her positioning as non-central, and is therefore on the boundary’s “other side.” She characterizes the center by appearing as its negation: the center is everything that Yehudit is not. The text, it seems, opens no channel through which a woman might exist within the national space without either subjecting to the label of “peripheral” or waiving femininity as a gender — that is, waiving the distinction, even the stereotypical one, that grows out of the history of woman’s cultural representations, and that would find expression in the exploration of alternative modes of existence, ones that do not presuppose male superiority.

Alongside the option of accepting and embracing an inferior position within the national formation, it is also possible, as Yaffa Berlovitz suggests, to read the text as representing the difficulties of trying to live in the country within the boundaries of the Zionist commitment, and in particular those hardships caused by arbitrary events, for whom no one is responsible. But this specific text itself does not provide a link to Zionism. In this text, Zionism does not contain its own rupture within it, because its boundaries are marked not by physical hardships and limitations, but by exclusions and hierarchies based on race, class, nationality, and gender. However, gender blindness — that is, reading the story as an individual case representing an entire category of “arbitrary” events, whose gender is inconsequential — is, in fact, precisely what allows the text’s inclusion within the Zionist cultural repertoire. A reading that retains the critical view of life in Zion (that is, the impossibility of persevering in the Zionist act in the face of random occurrences), but that does not stress the hegemonic position, which accepts the woman’s culpability at face value — such a reading relies on the explanation

the story itself suggests for the failure of the personal Zionist endeavor of Yechezkel Weinholz. For even if Yehudit has died, and even if he is currently without sons, Weinholz's world might have been filled by the Zionist vision (whose realization, as we learn time and again, is so successful); he himself even tries to console himself with this possibility on several occasions. On top of which there is also the option, painful as it might be, of remarrying and fathering children to carry on the fulfillment of the vision.

But it is precisely at this point that another issue arises. The arbitrariness of Yehudit's illness (the arbitrariness of disaster) does not stand alone, but is intersected with another general issue that troubles Weinholz, a particular failure he experiences: his inability to maintain congruency between fulfillment in his private life and fulfillment on the public level. In "*Bil'adeah*," the demand for this correspondence is articulated not in particular ideological (socialist) or national (Zionist) terms, but rather in universalist terms: Yechezkel's failure to find compensation for his private loss in the fulfillment of the collective vision (that is, compensation for his childlessness in the success of the general Zionist endeavor, to which he contributes) is wrapped in a more comprehensive and universal failure — the failure to privilege human beings above all else. "What is more important — man or the trees of the field?" — this strange and alien question has been bothering Yechezkel throughout the morning" (p. 79). His answer on this morning is — the tree. He forgoes visiting his ailing former friend, Finkel, preferring instead to tend to his trees, even though he knows that "The trees will not die in a day" (p. 80). The trees vanquish the man; and as the story makes very clear, the triumph of the Zionist endeavor over an interpersonal relationship does not make Weinholz any happier. To the contrary; that night, of all nights, he wonders "why and for whom he was toiling this way" (p. 80). From an ideological perspective that requires a correspondence between fulfillment in public existence and the fulfillment of private, dynastic-familial life, a life that cannot be replaced by the national vision, an ideology that justifies itself by adopting a universalist position, which sees humans as superior to any tree — from that perspective, preferring the tree is a failure so profound that it erases all the successes achieved in growing it (both literally and as a metaphor for fieldwork in the Zionist context).

The shift the text proposes, then, is not from a gender-based debate of national belonging (with which the text is quite preoccupied) to an ideology of the unity of interior and exterior, personal and collective, private-domestic and communal. Since the opposition of interior and exterior, of private and public, is itself gendered (each pole is signified in culture by a different gen-

der: the interior is female, and the exterior, the public, is male), to break away from gender, the text moves to universal values, which transcend nationality (and Zionism) and therefore also transcend ideology. The universal value of human importance joins its concrete realization in a specific life and becomes the national justification; but when the universal value is violated—when Weinholz prefers the tree over the man—then the national system can no longer make up for what is missing in his personal life. The nonfulfillment of the private value is conceived as “punishment” for the distortion of the universal value: Yehudit’s illness, which leads to her death and leaves Weinholz lonely and childless, is in fact the concrete realization of this distortion. This is not a case of an arbitrary fate that makes it “difficult” to fulfill the Zionist vision; it is a loss of the correspondence between realization in the private sphere and realization in the public one, a loss born out of the distortion of a universal value. The universal value transcends both ideology and nation, and nationalism is only a concretization of it. It is not the private sphere that moves up the hierarchy of values, rising above the national or the ideological values. It is the universal, as “blind” to nationalism as it is “blind” to gender, that creates the correspondence between public and private, and without which neither one can exist.

The universalist reading is not only made possible, but is, in fact, suggested by the text as the best way of organizing its materials. It is also what allows a story that might be perceived as anti-Zionist to be included in the repertoire of Zionist texts. And the universalist reading of the materials dealing with the causes of Weinholz’s failure and departure is what enables a reading from a female positioning to keep the text seemingly “ungendered.” Thus, rather than have Yehudit (the woman) represent the failure of Zionist fulfillment, the failure is attributed to the distortion of the universal value and its consequences in private, family life—or, rather, to the absence of such a life. The woman is no longer the destructive witch, but, as is often the case, a symbol of something else, something greater than herself, of which she is only a representation. That “something” is the disruption of the universal order. On the one hand, such a reading rescues the woman from the marginal position of a witch, but at the same time it precludes the construction of a concrete femininity: femininity can only be a symbol for other, more supreme values. Women, then, cannot be full partners in nationalism; only a symbol of the conditions under which nationalism might exist.

Universalism, then, is gender blindness: universalism depends on this blindness (in the sense that it is possible to conceive of a “universal” that is applied to both men and women regardless of their different social position-

ing and power relations), it ratifies this blindness, and is also the means by which the blindness to gender can be overridden. A stauncher subversive reading of this text would expose in it the claim that because the failure to realize the vision involves a failure in the private sphere, it is actually the consequence of femininity (which exists in the private sphere). In other words, this is not a rendition of a specific, random (arbitrary) case of a certain “Yehudit,” but the outcome of imperative feminine aspects that cannot be of service to the Zionist endeavor, but can only destroy it.

In “*Bil’adeah*,” this biological-feminine context assumes a particular validity, since Weinholz’s despair and departure are caused by a failure of the distinct feminine-biological function: childbearing. The story constructs its entire rationale on the link between female biology and femininity: the woman’s softness, tenderness, and childishness are all linked in the narrative to her inability to bear children. The woman is barred from entering nationalism by her (necessary) absence from the loci of Zionist action (the field and the community center), and allowed in only through the symbol (woman symbolizing the private sphere, the domestic, which must find fulfillment in the Zionist discourse, and symbolizing also the universal value of the supremacy of the individual human being) or else through childbirth (the necessary continuation of the private dimension); yet these kinds of inclusion in nationalism rules out physical, flesh-and-blood feminine existence (separate from biological and symbolic motherhood).

The most radical act of subversion made possible by this particular text is the identification within it of two representations of “woman.” Yehudit is a woman; yet according to stereotypical female characteristics, combined with characteristics produced by the story, Yechezkel, her husband, is also a “woman.” Like her, the “girl,” he too is “filled with a youthful joy” (p. 87); like her (and like the Arab digging, as she does, in the garden), “he is but a small man” (who cannot find complete satisfaction in the ideal and needs flesh-and-blood offspring [p. 85]). He takes over Yehudit’s household chores (p. 78), is repeatedly shown in the classic female position of passive recumbence (pp. 87, 80—“lying flat,” p. 82—“falling to the bed,” “falling helplessly to the bench”), and like her he leaves the country because he cannot survive in it. Weinholz also indulges in the stereotypical female act of predicting the future (he dreams of Yehudit’s death, not once but three times). Even when he acts as a man, his actions go hand in hand with those of a woman: He successfully influences other members of the community, but also gives bad advice to his friend because, like a woman, he does not have a clear view of the situation; like a man, he cares for the trees and waters

them, but the text describes in just as much detail how he sews animal skins in the winter, like a woman (p. 85); he races outside to the fields—but at home he returns over and over to the classic female positioning: standing indoors and looking out the window (pp. 82, 84, 85); like a man he stares, but this male pattern crumbles, because his gaze is fixed on the darkness, and also because Yehudit's eyes are fixed on him (p. 82), and the one-eyed woman in his dream surveys him, while Yehudit gives him a reproachful look (p. 84).

These acts and modes of behavior, masculine but also feminine, do not lead to a reading of Weinholz as a "real" woman. They do, however, help undermine a purely biological conception of "femininity" and lend weight to its understanding as a cultural construct based on acquired behavior (Weinholz learns to cook, and apparently also has learned to sew) and cultural conventions (lying as a passive female act, staring as an active male one). Moreover, the "feminization" of Yechezkel allows for a different judgment of abandoning the country: Unlike Yehudit, who leaves against her will and only under the threat of death, Yechezkel, the other "woman," leaves not when his body breaks down, but when his spirit is broken. Yehudit's Zionist struggle, the struggle of her concrete body, tormented by physical pain, remains in Zion and continues to strive for its vision, will not relinquish its function of occupying real, concrete space, which is required for the physical fulfillment of the abstract Zionist dream, emerges as a far deeper commitment than the emotional crisis of the "woman" Yechezkel, who collapses because his family name is cut out.

The claim that "feminine" and "masculine," just like "nationalism" and "Zionism," are cultural constructs whose boundaries are marked by the exclusion of an "Other," are created out of an assigned catalogue of traits, and as such are ideologically biased and organized on the basis of ideological understandings and their interrelations, allows only one body to be signified as concrete. For the woman in this story has a concrete body, a real body, a body that suffers pain, undergoes surgery, and dies. For a body signified as what "lies beyond signification," it responds to the demand for a concrete, physical presence within the marked space of Zionist presence and realization—a demand that the culturally gendered construct "masculinity" does not fulfill in this story. The analogy between Yehudit and Yechezkel, as two subjects with "feminine" signifiers, externalizes the contrast between their identical acts of departure. While both forsake the space and leave it behind, Yehudit, both in leaving and in dying, continues to maintain the necessary concrete body, a real body. Yechezkel, meanwhile, reverts to being what is

the main signifier of exile: the broken spirit, the symbolic illness, the biological and emotional barrenness, the absence signified by life in foreign lands, which is a kind of death-in-living.

The destabilization of gender does not mean a reversal of gender; rather, it offers an alternative story of understanding gender and its pertinence to the national story. The lack of gender stability in the story allows the female gender an alternative positioning, and enables an alternative national relationship based on concretization rather than on abstraction and generalization. Thus, the construction of a national-Zionist-feminine subject is performed in the “void,” in the empty space left by the Zionist ethos: that of the body. The space of the concrete, sexual body does not command the center of the Zionist act, in which the body operates by wielding a pickaxe and by contributing to the community. It remains on the margins, less worthy or a mere symbol and metaphor for the central Zionist act. But from this position — stereotypical-peripheral, physical, sexual-feminine — arises the power to rattle the seeming gender stability and to construct an alternative feminine subject: that of feminine nationalism.

Compared to contemporary women writers (and also to later ones) who attempted to construct a national feminine subject, Puhachewsky seeks to constitute agency by means of a uniquely radical act. Unlike other women authors, she chooses to deconstruct the conceptual system that creates women’s exclusion in the first place. The very concept of gender is critically deconstructed by her and exposed as an artificial construct, as a cultural pattern. It is revealed as the construction of the center through exclusion, a construction that delineates itself against a series of constructed identities that it aspires to present as “biological” and “natural.” The concept of femininity is also dissolved into its elements; for Puhachewsky, “femininity” is not a complete and solid unity, stable and without fractures, but a series of schemas — childish traits, a structure of disease, exile, motherhood, foreignness, weakness — that do not add up into a single totality that necessarily also breeds women’s public exclusion from partnership in the Zionist enterprise.

Above all, what Puhachewsky deconstructs is the *route* of femininity’s constitution in culture. But here, too, she both makes explicit the mode of construction and, simultaneously, points to the rupture inherent in this artificial process. She thus also externalizes how the concrete is annulled and transformed into a symbol: Yehudit’s concrete, ailing, dying, dead body is replaced by the symbolism of the disease of exile and departure. But at one and the same time, she exposes the profound rupture within this construction: the arbitrariness of the disease — an arbitrariness that will not submit to

the organization of the illness within an orderly meta-narrative, but that instead repeatedly disorders it—prevents the rigid organization required by cultural construction. It externalizes the randomness of the physical body, which refuses to be forced into artificial structures and mechanisms. This arbitrariness keeps the body as concrete material, despite the constructionist effort to turn it into a symbol: It sickens, weakens, and dies. The female component actually appears here as a body that remains present in Zion, that continues to toil for the Zionist vision and insists on occupying actual, material space. The structure of “masculinity,” already presented as fragile and tainted with “femininity,” does not, in this story, maintain its requisite physical presence in space, which signifies the Zionist presence and fulfillment.

Almost paradoxically, Puhachewsky uses this series of critical deconstructions of gender, femininity, and their constituting mechanisms to establish femininity as agency. Deconstruction actually presents an option of self-construction, of rectification, through its own critical mode of operation, which materializes in the concretization of the symbolic: Yehudit becomes a factor in Zionism by turning her symbolic value as “illness” into a concrete illness, and her symbolic function as destructive witch into a destructive reality. By intensifying the concretization of the concrete body in a concrete space that is physically and materially abandoned, Puhachewsky performs a critical procedure on the very route through which symbolic femininity is constructed in the Zionist national context.

Puhachewsky’s critical act is especially invasive, especially revolutionary, because she creates agency by deconstructing the roots of the cultural practice through which belonging is established. In other words, agency is produced through two mechanisms: on the one hand, the concretization of the symbolic, and on the other hand, the deconstruction and critique of “femininity” and “gender” as cultural terms, and of the cultural mechanisms that construct them. The resulting critical stance exposes the mechanism that constitutes femininity in culture, as well as its fractures and ruptures: The deconstructive act, in other words, also carries a critical power, one that produces agency.