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## Knowing Lesbians, Lesbian Knowing: Introduction

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*Chava Frankfort-Nachmias and Erella Shadmi*

Despite the rapid, recent development of a new body of scholarship on lesbians, most scholars in the United States have neglected the lives of lesbians in other countries. Interestingly, there is no body of scholarship regarding lesbians and lesbianism in Israel. Most of the studies published so far on homosexuality in Israel, focus mainly on gay men. Lesbians in the main prefer to publish reflections on their experience in lesbian-only publications or in the Israeli-only feminist journal *Noga*.

This edited volume, the first to be published on lesbians and lesbianism in Israel, is designed to provide a broad perspective on the experience of lesbians in contemporary Israeli society and insights into some of the institutions that have helped shape this experience. The articles in this collection analyze how culturally specific political, ideological, and social systems construct lesbian identities, experiences, and dilemmas. They also examine how a specific society is seen, understood, and interpreted from a lesbian perspective.

Israel sets up a paradoxical framework for such an analysis because it combines two worlds: on the one hand, it is a liberal society, characterized by democratic institutions, principles of equality, justice, and freedom, and a relatively free flow of communication (although recent economic and militaristic developments have inhibited liberalism and democracy in Israel); on the other hand, it is characterized by tribal inclinations, a high level of familialism, nationalistic and messianic ideologies, the strong influence of religion and tradition, and military involvement in government and civil society. Moreover, since Israel is still engaged in a nation-building process and is still facing security threats and challenges to its existence, collectivist ideologies that give a premium to state interests and national identity over individual needs and sectoral subcultures have usually dominated the national dialogue (Ezrahi 1997;

Yishai 1997). Pluralism often has been compromised for the sake of national unity, and the “other” and the “different” often have been marginalized, oppressed, and become outcast. In such a society, lesbians are caught between their wish to be part of the collective and their desire to be heard and allowed to develop their own identity and culture. Lesbianism thus defines the boundaries between the liberal, progressive tendency and the traditional, oppressive orientation of the larger society.

This book focuses on three main issues. First, what are the dilemmas faced by Israeli lesbians; in particular, what are the intersections between nationalism, Zionism, militarism, familialism, and heterosexism, and how do these forces influence the perception of lesbianism in Israel? Second, what are the individual identities developed by Israeli lesbians to survive as lesbians, to preserve their lesbian identity, and, at the same time, to adjust to such demanding and collectivist-oriented culture? Third, what are the political strategies developed by the lesbian community, whose commitment and involvement in activity for women has always been impressive? These issues stand at the core of this collection. In foreshadowing and exploring lesbian identities, strategies, and dilemmas, this collection offers an analysis of major dimensions of Israeli lesbianism as well as of Israeli culture and politics.

Adopting a lesbian standpoint as a paradigm guiding this work will allow (hopefully) the reader to see Israeli lesbianism as enacted in a heterosexist society. For example, Luzzatto’s research shows how encounters between lesbian and heterosexual women provide a possibility for young lesbians to experience identity elements, which are granted low legitimization within the lesbian community. Furthermore, the insight gained from this collection is not limited exclusively to Israeli lesbians. Starting from the daily activities of Israeli lesbians enables us to see things that might otherwise have been invisible to us (Harding 1991, 249)—not just about those lives but about the inherent cultural contradictions between lesbian identity and Jewish and Zionist identity, conformity and deviance or Palestinian and Mizrahi identity. Barkai’s article on being a lesbian on a kibbutz; Mickey M’s piece “A Rainbow Kufyya,” Devorah Esther’s profound account of life as an orthodox lesbian and Motzafi-Haller’s exploration of lesbians of Mizrahi origin all illustrate these inherent contradictions.

A lesbian standpoint as illustrated in Schachter’s and Safran’s articles on lesbians in the peace movement and “Women in Black,” also permits us to see and to imagine communities that do not need or want men. “From the perspective of lesbian lives, communities of women designed, organized and directed by women become imaginable” (Harding 256).

Finally, Israeli lesbian lives have been devalued and neglected as frameworks for a critical examination of Israeli society. The view from the perspective of lesbian lives is the view from the “other side.” The struggles that Israeli lesbians must engage in for survival can reveal regularities of social life and their underlying causal tendencies that are invisible from the perspective of

heterosexual lives. This collection illustrates how lesbian exclusion can become the source of new understandings of central issues in Israeli society.

The volume is divided into four sections, each focusing on a specific issue central to Israeli lesbian identity. The first section, "Experience," delineates the unique and diverse aspects of lesbian life in contemporary Israeli society. It consists of articles on the history of lesbian organizing (Haya Shalom), the legal status of gay men and women (Ira Hadar), lesbian experience in what has been considered the most unique aspect of Israeli society: the Kibbutz (Nurit Barkai), lesbians who chose to leave Israel (Chava Frankfort-Nachmias), and the experience of being a lesbian in an orthodox community in Jerusalem (Devora Esther).

The articles in Part II provide various readings of Israeli lesbian identity and culture. A growing body of work in the past two decades has altered the shape of our understanding of homosexuality from a subjective state of individual desire for persons of the same sex to a significant category of identity involving social and political practices and social institutions that are above and beyond individual actors. The authors offer a fresh look at the development of a thriving lesbian culture in Israel. This section includes an autobiographical narrative of gay bars (Amalia Ziv), young lesbians' ways of defining themselves (Diana Luzzatto), Mizrahi's lesbians' (of Arab-Jewish origin) manners of articulating their internally contradictory social identities at the crosslines of gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, and class positions (Pnina Motzafi-Haller), and the identity construction experience of young lesbians from the former Soviet Union (Adi Kuntsman).

The third section of this book explores the political dimension of lesbian identity in Israel. It includes two analyses of the experience of lesbians in the peace movement (Hannah Safran and Su Schachter) and one analysis of the conflict of identities of Arab-Jew (Mizrahi) and Israeli-Palestinian lesbians (Mickey M).

The articles in the fourth section explore the intersections and discontinuities between Israeli national identity and identities produced in and by Israeli lesbian communities. Kadish analyzes the uneasy relations between Zionism and lesbianism and Shadmi shows the ways n eminant social ideologies made lesbianism a nonissue in Israel.

#### SOME REFLECTIONS OF THE EDITORS

For more than ten years we have been trying to put together a collection of articles about Israeli lesbians. Because we are lesbians living at the crossroads of theory and practice, academia and activism, we feel, in finishing this collection, a sense of both joy and frustration. Nevertheless, the difficulties we faced in collecting and editing this volume and the voices absent from it make us feel uncomfortable.

In this introductory chapter we wish to describe and reflect on the editing process and the collection as a whole and suggest that both process and

product reflect the state of mind of Israeli lesbians as a collective. They reflect what Israeli lesbians are willing to know about themselves, what they are willing to publicly acknowledge, name, discuss, and debate. The contradictions, pains, and dilemmas they are reluctant to face are absent from this volume and are reflected in the editing process and its problematic nature.

#### EDITING WITHOUT EDITING

When we began working on this collection, we embarked on a path previously taken by hardly anyone: Israeli lesbians have rarely been studied or examined by either scholars or lesbians themselves (Shadmi 2000). If they were at all, it has often been as part of the gay (men and women) community and identity, rarely by themselves.

Only recently, that is in the last five to six years, are lesbians better tolerated by Israeli society, and their experience is slowly beginning to be examined by lesbians, gay men, and others, still to a very limited extent.

This dismal state of affairs puts us, as the editors of the first and so far the only collection of articles about Israeli lesbians ever published, in a position of responsibility: lesbians and society as a whole might view such a collection as presenting and representing the lesbian community and lesbians in general. Consequently, lesbians might have high expectations as to its impact on public debate regarding lesbianism. Issues raised by the writers of this collection might stir conflicts among lesbians themselves and with other social change groups; they might influence public debate regarding, for example, ways of political struggle and the possibilities of alliance among social change activists. As such, we are aware of the potentially political meaning such a collection might hold for lesbian and other social change struggles in Israel.

As a first collection, the editing was also uneasy and challenging: uneasy—because it posits us as gatekeepers, who have the power to exclude and include, to marginalize and demarginalize, to give or to deny voice, to use and abuse power. Challenging—because it raises many issues and dilemmas, such as:

- Who is our audience—Israeli lesbians, Israeli feminist academics, Israeli society, non-Israeli lesbians, non-Israeli scholars, and social change activists? To whom are we accountable?
- What is our goal: empowerment of women, theory construction, social critique, documentation, and empirical analysis?
- Can this collection fully represent the diversity among Israeli lesbians (along axes of race, nationality, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ideology, and so forth)? If not (which is usually the case), which groups must be represented? On the basis of what criterion?
- What perspective should we adopt—the one emphasizing the structurally marginalized position of lesbians in Israel or the one linking

lesbianism to larger issues of power, identity, community, and her/his history? Are both the same in terms of social change and lesbian identity in Israel?

- Can we, as Ashkenazi/white, leftist, radical feminist, and peace activists, be trusted by all lesbians so they might be willing to contribute to this collection?
- Can we, as such, be open to all perspectives and points of view, let alone antifeminist or right wing? Can we reach out to all diverse Israeli lesbians?
- What about the writers? Should this collection be open to activists and scholars, lesbians and heterosexuals, feminists and nonfeminists, women and men? What about women whose voice is important but who are incapable of writing?

In short, issues of representation and positionality, power and authority, community, identity and boundaries, theory and practice, formal and informal knowledge, sites of theory production, external and internal foci of reference, process and product (Swilder and Arditì 1994)—all these and much more are raised by the editing of such a collection.

As we, the editors, come from different theoretical and political positions, our reaction to this challenge was different:

*Chava Frankfort-Nachmias:*

As a quantitative sociologist and a lesbian feminist I have struggled to balance my positivist “bias” with a commitment to feminist epistemology. I was trained as a positivist and a quantitative sociologist. Following radical changes in my personal life from a “married heterosexual” to a “lesbian feminist” I began to see the assumptions of “value free” science and objectivity as essentially flawed conceptions, which have excluded from inquiry those who are marginalized.

In my work on Israeli lesbians I found that dominant paradigms employed in analyzing Israeli society have produced research and knowledge that rendered Israeli lesbians’ lives, concerns, and interests as invisible. Furthermore, the knowledge, if produced at all, has not been useful for Israeli lesbians, and has reinforced gender and other social hierarchies (Harding 1991).

As a co-editor of this collection I have been guided by, Harding’s, (1991) and Mies’s work (1983) on feminist standpoint epistemology. They advocate “the value free research of neutrality toward the research object be replaced by “conscious partiality” toward the oppressed, engagement in their struggles for change, and the creation of a form of research that fosters conscientization of both the researcher and the research.” (Mies 1983, 122-26; quoted in Gorelick 1991, 461).

Thus, the central framework I have employed in editing this volume is that of a “situated knower” and “situated knowledge” (Harding), where knowledge about Israeli lesbians reflects the perspective of Israeli lesbians. Furthermore, I felt

committed to supply an account of that world which is accessible not only to the authors in this collection or an academic audience but also to the Israeli lesbian community in general.

*Erella Shadmi:*

The internal contradictions of editing this volume filled me, on the one hand, with paralyzing fear of hurting our sister-activists and the lesbian-feminist struggles; on the other, they challenged my integrity and social responsibility. In particular, editing this collection gave me an opportunity to better integrate my two selves—the political and the academic—long separated by feminist activists' refusal to listen and appreciate feminist academic efforts as well as by feminist scholars' reluctance to be involved in feminist politics and closely study women's experience (see also Shadmi 2000). In the same vein, this collection perhaps suggests ways to integrate scholarship and politics, so painfully divided in Israel.

Taking the responsibility of editing after all, it was clear to me that most of the issues such a collection raises are irresolvable; that this collection is more of a political act than a theoretical or scholarly endeavor; that being a lesbian-feminist, Ashkenazi/white, middle-class activist, my editorial decisions will be closely scrutinized by many of my sister lesbian and feminist activists and scholars. In short, in editing this collection I have to be aware of these issues. I cannot avoid them.

In such a dilemma-ridden situation, various editorial strategies could be employed. Among them: limiting the scope of the collection to one issue (e.g., the relations between lesbianism and feminism), one perspective (e.g., that of activists) or one theory (e.g., queer theory). We felt uncomfortable with any of these strategies, especially for a first collection of its kind. We decided to use another strategy, which we may call "uncritical polyvocalization," made of two elements: first, we opened the possibility to contribute to this collection to whoever wished to participate, be s/he lesbian, heterosexual, woman, or man; although top priority was given to lesbians and special efforts were made to reach out to them. In this way we were aiming at multiple representation of lesbianism. Writers had to meet only two conditions: being lesbian or lesbian-friendly and having writing skills. We were aware of the problematic inherent in the second condition since more than a few lesbians, especially activists, either have no writing experience, are so politically involved they hardly have spare time, or find it hard to make a living let alone write. We therefore made a special attempt to wrestle with it. For one, we first approached lesbians who regularly write for the community's journal and/or participate in the community's debates, assuming they were experienced in making a clear argument and expressing their views. Second, we asked skilled scholars to accompany less skilled writers in the writing process. Third, we invited feminist anthropologists, whose politics and academic interest seemed to us valuable, to write a chapter based on an in-depth interview with lesbians whose voice

seemed important but who might lack writing skills, especially working-class Mizrahi (Arab-Jewish) lesbians. We also proposed to publish articles anonymously, if necessary.

Knowledge of the English language was not required since English-speaking lesbians volunteered to translate and, if needed, edit chapters written in Hebrew.

The second element making up the “uncritical polyvocalization” of the editing process was opening the collection to every topic, perspective (political or theoretical), and writing style (scholarly, documentary, experiential, autobiographical, and so forth) chosen by the writer—as long as she was making a point. The only instructions the writers were given in advance were: “We are looking for something more than a journalistic article which may but need not attain the level of an academic paper. In particular, we are looking for the ways lesbians interpret, make sense and conceptualize their experience.”

Also, if necessary, writers, in particular nonacademic writers, were assisted in advance in defining the boundaries of their subject so chapters would not overlap and the foci of their arguments would be clear.

From this point of the editing process, we, the co-editors, differ in our views:

*Erella Shadmi:*

After the submission of the articles, no comments and criticism were offered and no additions and corrections were requested so as to ensure diversity and authenticity of views and ways of seeing and expressing.

My way of editing, including both the uncritical polyvocalization strategy and the “no comments” strategy, was kind of “editing without editing,” that is, I consciously limited my responsibility to reaching out efforts and coordinating among articles. I made no attempt to control or influence either the selection of the writers or their writing process, yet did my duty as an editor in providing some initial instructions and counseling regarding writing style and subject matter and kept the project moving despite obstacles.

The editing strategy I used was not without problems. First and foremost, I could not avoid the gatekeeping position due to my social positionality. No matter how many reaching out efforts I made, they depended, to a large extent, on the social circles in which I mingle and were limited by my social position.

Second, despite my uncritical openness to multiple voices, I retained some control in my hands. I decided not to make the editing process a cooperative one in which either the lesbian community or a group of writers work collectively. I decided against it since my experience in collective feminist decision making was always problematic, rarely efficient and never truly democratic and participatory (see, for example, Shadmi 2000a on Women in Black).

Third, openness and pluralism, with little criticism and control, meant that I could scarcely have controlled the social and political attitudes of the writers. I could have been faced with racist, antifeminist, or “orientalist” (in

Said's term) writers and articles. I was fortunate enough not to have found this among the writers. I am not sure I would have known how to handle them.

By adopting such an editing strategy I hoped that the process of collecting and editing would be easy and the end product—in terms of the subjects covered and the identity and positioning represented by the writers—would be diverse.

*Chava Frankfort-Nachmias:*

My editing approach was greatly influenced by my research orientation and training. My experience was limited to academic writing, which adheres to a fairly formal structure and style of writing. I found it easier to evaluate the articles submitted by academics like me.

Living and working in the United States I was not socially or politically part of the lesbian community in Israel. This made me less uncomfortable with my gatekeeping role as an editor. Ultimately however, my editing focused on issues of writing style and, conceptual clarity, which led to dropping two of the articles in the collection. In one case the author was given the opportunity to revise but she declined. Most articles required only minor editing. In a few cases where I requested more substantial revisions my comments and recommendations were welcome.

#### EDITING IN PRACTICE: ENTHUSIASM AND RELUCTANCE

In practice, the process lasted more than ten years. Throughout the years we approached well over one hundred potential writers—mainly lesbians (both scholars and activists), but also gay men and heterosexual feminist scholars. All reacted with enthusiasm and interest to our request, but most of them turned down our overture claiming that they were too busy. Some agreed to contribute to the book, but only a small number (fourteen, editors included) finally submitted an article. Only one, a young Mizrahi MA student, turned down our proposition because, as she put it (to our best recollection), the editors' politics seemed wrong to her. Two writers, leading Mizrahi lesbian activists, never finished their writing because, so they said, they were too politically busy and felt unskillful in writing. Many of the potential writers, although agreeing that such a collection is both theoretically and politically important, made life difficult for us: Some let us chase after them for months only to learn that they had decided not to write an article. Others never bothered to call back after we left dozens of messages on their answering machines. Still others, promised to write an article, but never kept their promise, giving all kinds of excuses.

In a way, every editor goes through such hardship, yet we found the process we went through different: editors usually encounter difficulties in getting the writers to submit their articles on time. They encounter fewer problems in the initial stage of making the writers undertake the commitment



for writing. We, on the other hand, turned, as we said, to a very large number of potential writers. Only a small minority (less than 15 percent) agreed to take on the obligation. This distinction apparently reflects what seemed to us to be an ambivalent attitude toward this collection by lesbians (as well as gay men and heterosexual women; yet this is another issue): on one level, enthusiasm and endorsement, on another level, reluctance and reservations. We were puzzled by this attitude.

#### POLITICS-ORIENTED: OUTWARD LOOKING

As the end product shows, these attempts were only partially successful: two Mizrahi (Arab-Jewish) lesbian activists and one lesbian anthropologist who interviewed several working-class Mizrahi lesbians did not submit their papers. A gay man and a lesbian therapist did not keep their promise to write articles for this book.

The end product consists of fourteen articles covering a wide range of lesbian experience in Israel. Fourteen writers wrote these articles. As a group, the writers are all Jewish; all but two Ashkenazi/white; all are middle class (as far as we know); all but two are lesbians; some activists, other scholars, the majority of whom are involved in feminist or lesbian politics in Israel. We knew no Palestinian-Israeli lesbian at the time of editing and we failed to locate any through our personal contacts. Though, the voice of one Palestinian-Israeli lesbian is partially heard through Mickey M's article.

Only four articles address as their main focus issues of difference and diversity among lesbians: one discusses class and ethnicity (Motzafi-Haller), the second (Mickey M)—race, class, and ethnicity, the third religious faith (Devorah Esther), and the fourth femininity and, to some extent, sexuality (Luzzatto). Thus, difference and diversity along axes of political ideology, ethnicity, race, class, nationality, and (to a large extent) sexuality are not sufficiently represented by this collection. Consequently, the absence of certain voices (varieties of lesbian sexualities, right-wing, Palestinian, Mizrahi, working-class, upper-class, nonpolitical and unaffiliated), on one hand, and the positionality of the majority of the writers (middle-class, Ashkenazi, mainly organized, and politically oriented), on the other, seem to characterize this volume.

On the whole, it seems as if this collection focuses on political issues and dilemmas and on the larger society and its oppressive mechanisms, leaving out significant personal and collective experiences, which also construct the lesbian identity and reality in Israel. In particular, issues related to lesbian social positioning, economic conditions, diversity and identity, and to the lesbian community itself, which point to tensions and contradictions embedded in lesbian experience, were avoided. This group of articles is, thus, mainly outward rather than inward oriented: it looks beyond the lesbian community itself, concentrating particularly on oppressive mechanisms in society as a whole.

## LESBIAN KNOWING AND SILENCING

On the surface, the distinguishing features of both the writers and the editing process should not come as a surprise: as a collection written and published in English, edited by two Ashkenazi, middle-class, educated women and edited in a nonparticipatory manner, it might provoke opposition among some potential contributors. Also, many Israeli lesbians, particularly those who are activists and social change oriented, are too busy making a living and being active in politics. They may see the significance of such a collection, may even wish to contribute to it, but are too involved in other activities, which seemed to them more politically urgent than devoting time to writing.

The clear preference they accord to practice over theory further makes them ambivalent toward what they see as a research-, and not politics-oriented endeavor. Their reluctance to participate in such a work may further represent a way of protesting against Israeli feminist and nonfeminist academia, including lesbians in academia, who showed little interest in lesbian experience and rarely did research about lesbians' lives and perspectives.

All these factors—the editors' positioning, the editing style, Israeli feminist academia, lesbians' economic concerns and their preference for politics over theory—although not without merit, point mainly to external circumstances, factors beyond the control of lesbians.

The thematic nature of this volume, namely, its orientation toward politics and society rather than toward identity and community, points, however, to another interpretation: this collection seems to us the result of a deliberate choice made by the potential writers who declined to contribute to this collection. It reflects the issues and dilemmas the Israeli lesbian community is willing to confront and with which it is ready to deal. And these issues are mainly political and relate to the society at large and its oppressive mechanism.

We are suggesting then that this collection and its features are products of choices made by lesbians themselves. They reflect the unwillingness of the Israeli lesbian community to reflexively contemplate its identity, experience, and struggle. It is lesbians' reluctance to examine the meaning of their identity and the way it is constructed which lies behind this collection. Such a reflexive elaboration goes beyond the binary opposition between society and "us," between the oppressor and the oppressed, and requires contextualization and problematization.<sup>1</sup> It requires explanation of the political and personal path lesbians have chosen (for example, favoring collaboration with gay men rather than feminist women). It requires facing issues of lesbians (such as working-class lesbians) oppressed by lesbians, of silencing mechanisms by which unwanted ideologies (such as feminist-lesbian politics) or identities (such as upper-middle-class lesbians) are disregarded, and, consequently, of boundary construction by which certain lesbians are excluded and some issues and positions are left out of discourse. Such a process of reflexivity not only requires courage, maturity,

and sincerity; it in particular requires lesbians to connect themselves to the pains, dilemmas, and problematic, not only to the joy and pride, associated with lesbian identity and experience in contemporary Israel. A few strong and self-confident lesbians could be found in a long process of searching for and reaching out, and their thoughts are presented here. They represent nobody but themselves.

A close reading of their writing offers three explanations for this refusal to reflexively articulate lesbian identity in Israel. Two are external, stemming from the social and discursive surrounding of the lesbian community, and one is internal, springing from the community itself. First is the overwhelming presence and policing power of liberal Zionist ideology and its pressure to be heterosexual, endorse mainstream norms, and emphasize sameness rather than difference (vividly shown by Barkai in the microcosms of a kibbutz), consequently pushing lesbians to the margins (insightfully explicated by Ziv) and silencing them (see Kadish's and Shadmi's articles). The second is the absence of feminist articulation of an alternative woman's identity, which might provide an ideological and discursive framework within which lesbians' identity formation might take place. Finally, as a consequence of the contradictions in which Israeli lesbians live—between Zionism and lesbianism, between social acceptance and rejection—as well as the splits permeating Israeli society in general (along axes of nationality, religion, ethnicity, and class), the Israeli lesbian community fails to construct a safe space for self-reflexivity and to contemplate the interconnection between lesbianism, feminism, and the oppression of the Palestinians and Mizrahi Jews (see the articles by Su Schachter, Shalom, Mozafi-Haller, and Shadmi). This failure is further facilitated by the inability of the lesbian community to simultaneously serve as a source for solidarity necessary for the struggle against oppression and a site for debating identities and negotiating splits and contradictions. This problematic nature of the lesbian community perhaps explains why the only writers who directly and openly discuss issues of lesbian identities are the two heterosexual writers in this collection (Motzafi-Haller and Luzzatto) and two writers whose academic or personal roots are not Israeli (Mickey M and Kuntsman).

Such interpretations throw light on the fears associated with lesbian experience and self-reflection in Israel. Living in fear and silence—as the experience of abused children and women teaches us—is a way of preserving oppression. But, this volume indicates ways out, toward Israeli lesbians' reflexivity regarding their identity and position vis-à-vis the liberal Zionist paradigm: the articulation of difference rather than sameness and of the interconnection between the oppression and liberation of lesbians and of the “other” women, whether feminist, religious, elderly and/or other, Palestinians, Mizrahi Jews, working-class people (see the articles by Shalom, Schachter, Shadmi, Kadish, and Devorah Esther). In fact, Israeli lesbians are just beginning to do so (Kadish's article), and we hope this collection will facilitate and contribute to the debates beginning to take place in the Israeli lesbian community.

## NOTES

1. In a somewhat similar way Amalia Ziv interprets the fact that lesbian poetry more than lesbian fiction is published in Israel. See Ziv 1995.

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