

ELEMENTS OF STYLE IN THE FICTION OF AMALIA KAHANA-CARMON

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THE WRITINGS of Amalia Kahana-Carmon may be categorized as "lyrical" prose, as fiction which reflects the artistic attempt to put into words the world of personal, inner experience.¹ In general, her works demonstrate an interweaving of outer, objective events with an inner, subjective view of those events. In creating this blend, Kahana-Carmon has utilized the various technical tools — narrative, dramatic, and linguistic — of lyrical prose: interior monologue, both direct and indirect; "poetic" descriptions of landscape and background, filtered through the consciousness of the narrator or character; a stream-of-consciousness exposition, based on a psychological mode of free association; and a structure involving the disjunction or montage effect of time, place, and dramatic voices.² Above all, her stories are infused with varied designs or recurring patterns of metaphorical images, motifs, and other symbolic structures. This sort of design replaces plot, the "story-line" of more conventional realistic prose; it focuses attention on dimensions of inner experience; and, to a great degree, it is probably responsible for the term "lyrical," which has been used to describe this complex genre of writing.³

Various critics (including myself) have already discussed some of the general characteristics of Amalia Kahana-Carmon's mode of writing, especially the main themes, the narrative structures, and the image of the nar-

1. See Freedman (1963, pp. 1-17).

2. See Humphrey (1965, pp. 62-104).

3. On the notions of "design" and "pattern," see Humphrey (1965, pp. 85-112); Brower (1962, pp. 3-16, 123-137); and Freedman (1963, pp. 1-19 and *passim*).

rator.⁴ It seems, however, that much of the criticism written about her works has been weakest where it might have been strongest; namely, in the analysis of her style. For the most part, the articles which have dealt with this aspect of her works have been vague and ambiguous. For example, Kahana-Carmon is praised, on the one hand, for her "poetic language," for the "forcefulness of [her] imagistic language," her "delicate perception" of things, and her "inward writing, with all its sensitivity and grace."⁵ On the other hand, her works are sharply criticized for their undue "verbosity," for the "exotic esoterism" in her linguistic usages, and, in the opinion of one writer, for her "phantom-like, monsterish language," which fosters a repulsive sense of "falseness and artificiality."⁶ These sorts of comments, taken individually, do not relate at all to factors of meaning in Kahana-Carmon's writings; they ignore altogether the essential relationship between the language of literature and other meaning structures within the literary text.⁷ Moreover, such vague, imprecise remarks only muddle further the terms "lyrical" and "poetic" when utilized in the analysis and interpretation of prose fiction.⁸

Style is, of course, a central conveyor of meaning in all literary texts, whether prose or poetry. In the genre called "lyrical" prose, however, style often becomes the most important semantic ingredient. Particular uses of language and syntax in this genre play a central role in creating an illusion of the dramatized, inner consciousness. Though they surely are not used exclusively in lyrical prose, individual words or phrases are often utilized in this genre to reflect symbolic dimensions and to embody dynamic motifs. These usages thereby contribute subtly yet significantly to the development of the particular work's sense and to its effective artistic design.⁹

Such linguistic phenomena appear often in Amalia Kahana-Carmon's fiction as semantic vehicles. My aim here is to discuss three stylistic devices — the archaism, the cliché, and the euphuistic expression (*mālica*) — and to analyze their utilization as conveyors of meaning in one of Kahana-Carmon's short stories, "To Build Her a House in the Land of Shinar."¹⁰ I have chosen

4. See Bargad (1972), Calderon (1972), and Shaked (1974, pp. 168–174 and 205–219).

5. Excerpted, in the order given, from Shaked (1974, pp. 176 and 220), Tsemach (1973, p. 195), and Telpaz (1971). Cf. also Wieseltier (1966).

6. Tsemach (1973, p. 200), Sandbank (1972, p. 327), and Ben-Herzl (1971).

7. In contrast to these vague evaluative comments, Shaked (1974, pp. 175 and 220–221) has analyzed cogently certain syntactic usages in Kahana-Carmon's works.

8. Freedman (1963) has based his definitions mainly on epistemological theories and their artistic configurations. My attempt here is to delineate aspects of Kahana-Carmon's "poetic" style strictly in terms of descriptive stylistics.

9. See Humphrey (1965, pp. 90–99) on "word-phrase motifs."

10. First published in *Al Hamishmar*, September 14, 1966. Collected in Kahana-Carmon (1966, pp. 111–117).

these three elements of style, because they are particularly salient features of Kahana-Carmon's writings in general; they function often as prime vehicles in the projection of narrative tone, in characterization, in the structuring of both dramatic and metonymic action, and in the creation of motif designs. In view of their recurrent use, the archaism, the cliché, and the euphuism should be perceived as central stylistic elements in the structure and semantic content of Kahana-Carmon's fiction.

These linguistic devices have three basic, common features. First, they are difficult to define with absolute clarity. (This is especially true of the term *mālica*.) For the purpose of this discussion, succinct definitions, as unambiguous as possible, are best: (1) An archaism is an old-fashioned or outdated phrase no longer generally used in common parlance. Its Hebrew sources are usually the Bible, rabbinic literature, or the liturgy. (2) A cliché is a common phrase which has lost most of its cogency because of overuse.¹¹ (3) And *mālica* — according to Even-Shoshan's *New Hebrew Dictionary* — is an "inflated phrase," or "verses or parts of verses [from the Bible] interwoven" in everyday speech or writing, or "very high diction."¹² A second common feature of these linguistic formations is the difficulty often confronted in attempting to differentiate the three. For example, a Hebrew euphuism is usually constituted by archaic language; and often, depending upon the particular utterance, a *mālica* may also be considered to be a cliché.¹³ By the same token, the Hebrew cliché is often marked by a flowery diction which can readily be called *mālica*-like. Thirdly, these three usages reflect and form part of the generally high level of stylistic expression in Kahana-Carmon's works. Most of her writings are infused with an obscure, difficult vocabulary, complex syntactic structures, and a high, formal diction. The reader is immersed in what appears to be a stylistic blend of Hebrew linguistic purism and an intricate artistic expressiveness.¹⁴ Within this general framework, however, one can clearly delineate the use of the three linguistic elements, which are the focal points of this discussion.

11. On the cliché as a variable, stylistic phenomenon, see Riffaterre (1955).

12. Shahevitch (1970) does not entirely succeed in his attempt to define the term *mālica*. Its literary utilization remains an open issue.

13. Voegelin (1960) uses the linguistic term "noncasual [or "formal"] utterance," which might be appropriate for *mālica*, but the term seems somewhat too general for this particular analytic context. "Noncasual utterance" also does not differentiate the varying register or tone of the three usages discussed here.

14. See Stankiewicz (1960) on the different norms ("innovating" and "archaic") at work in every speech community. In discussing the general influences of tradition and culture in the formulation of a literary language, Stankiewicz notes specifically that the use of heterogeneous elements from different language systems or layers "often becomes in poetry a purposeful, artistically exploited device" (p. 76).

“To Build Her a House in the Land of Shinar” is a short story whose “plot” may be summed up briefly. The setting is a new frontier town close to the Mediterranean coast, bordering on the northern Negev desert. A man and wife, apparently in their late thirties or early forties, have recently settled in the town. The housewife appears to be going through a depression of sorts; she is suffering from boredom and a lack of any hope or goal for the future. Her relationship with her husband has deteriorated of late (a typical Kahana-Carmon situation). She recalls from her childhood in Europe the time she had come with her mother to a residential part of the city, near a hospital, and she remembers the impression a glimpse of the medical staff had made upon her. Through the window she glances at a ship on the horizon, changing its direction — an experience she no longer has any hope for. And, finally, she serves tea to the “expert-on-nutrition-and-home-economics,” a kind of visiting government social worker who has come to town to assist the new residents in organizing their new homes and lives. The nutritionist’s advice to the housewife: take on a part-time job as a dental assistant; the job will make life easier and more interesting. The story ends with the housewife serving refreshments — and with an unambiguous feeling of personal irresolution. In essence, the short work portrays the gap between a superficial, pragmatic view of life and the inner, emotional needs of the individual. The expert argues, “It’s a question of organization”; the housewife responds, “No. It’s life, one’s fate.”

The story begins with a street conversation (overheard by the housewife) between the nutritionist and the town council chairman. The nutritionist remarks, “On the way here I saw a woman and her child going down into the heart of the wilderness.” The phrase “going down into the heart of the wilderness” (a literal translation of *ירדו בלב השממה*) technically is a metaphoric expression, but it has no real figurative connotation. The phrase is reminiscent of similar Hebrew expressions, like *ירדו במצולות* (the Egyptians “went down into the depths” of the Red Sea, Exod 15:5) or “in the heart of the sea” (*בלב ים*), or “seas” (*בלבב ימים*, Jonah 2:4) meaning, in each case, “in the midst of the ocean.”¹⁵ One could say that by bringing to mind dimensions of sea, desert and depths, the phrase neatly projects the frontier town backdrop of the story. But the expression bears a more significant meaning: by virtue of its high diction — the phrase evinces both archaic and euphuistic dimensions — *ירדו בלב השממה* raises a simple mother-and-child stroll to a higher level of activity. The diction suggests a kind of courageous, quasi-heroic act, the act of venturing undauntedly, one could say, into the midst of a vast wilderness. Through its semantic connotation the phrase re-

15. All translations of biblical quotations are taken from *The Holy Scriptures* (1960).

flects a sense of heroism inherent in confronting the dangers and challenges of life in a new frontier town. This connotation, however, clearly bespeaks the "establishment" attitude of the government nutritionist. Hence, the euphuism "went down into the heart of the wilderness" becomes an ironic motif in the story, a motif which develops with increasing intensity: heroic notions — even pragmatic ones — only exacerbate the housewife's inner, psychological debilities. In confronting similarly ironic themes in the story's duration and similar euphuistic expressions as well, the reader is thrust back to this initial *mālica* and recognizes its significance as an empty cliché (on the part of the nutritionist) with definite sarcastic overtones (on the part of the author).

The butt of sarcasm appears to be the notion of a neat, organized life style — with its accompanying tenor of optimistic progressivism — which is being promulgated by the government expert. This vigorous approach to life, touted as a panacea for life's problems, clashes with the housewife-heroine's emotional sensitivities. (It appears to clash as well with the author's sympathetic point of view.) People do not live by clichés, the connotation seems to be. Life is far more complex, too difficult for superficial answers. Beyond its own semantic weight, however, this particular ironic cliché becomes linked with similar phrases later in the story. Taken together, not only do these phrases form a significant motif design in the work, they also engender a sense of structural rhythm. A central function of these stylistic devices, therefore, is to emphasize continually the story's ironic motifs (such as the virtue of "newness" and the urban version of the pioneering ideal in Israel) and to remind the reader of the abiding sarcastic tone.

As the story progresses, the housewife waits for her temporary lodger (the nutritionist) to return to her apartment. While the housewife waits, the narrator reveals her inner feelings. She tried her best, the reader is told, "to gain the attention and the affection of the expert. But for that very reason "she harbored a slight hatred toward her" (נטרה לה איבה קלה). The euphuistic nature of the Hebrew phrase (which I have tried to render in the English wording, "harbored a slight hatred") accentuates the housewife's mixed feelings toward the nutritionist. In this way the stylistic device contributes centrally to the characterization of this ambivalent personality: the character is caught in a difficult, dualistic situation, torn between wanting to please and wanting to divulge her actual feelings. The phrase also stresses the story's main dramatic theme: the clash between an outer, surface mien and an inner dimension of emotive expression. Moreover, the very phrase קלה איבה ("a slight hatred") seems to convey its own inner contradiction; i.e., its configuration is that of oxymoron. One might say "a slight disaffection" or "some resentment," but not "a slight hatred." (In the Hebrew, טינה, or perhaps

טינה קלה, though the combination is not generally used.) Thus the oxymoron in itself projects both the inner inconsistency of the situation and the character's understated but seething unhappiness.

Soon the three characters — the nutritionist, the housewife, and her husband — sit at the table for light refreshments, and the conversation turns to the various ethnic foods the nutritionist has encountered over the years in her advisorial work. Suddenly, the husband is reminded of a favorite dish from his childhood. “You remember,” he remarks to his wife, “where we lived they used to eat doves, dove pudding.” Since this is the first time, after a long hiatus, that he has spoken to her directly at all, the wife is quite taken aback: “His words flew at her like a loosed arrow.” The language of this response is blatantly archaic. (I have attempted, at least, to render archaically the archaic sound of the original Hebrew *עברוה המלים*.) The use of the archaic grammatical form *עברוה* emphasizes the wife's surprise at her husband's suddenly revived communication; and the archaic (or euphuistic) sounding simile, *כחץ שלוח*, accentuates the pathetic, demeaning aspects of this minor trauma. The entire context is essentially ironic: the husband does indeed end his long silence and speaks to his wife; but at the same time it is clear that by his reference to ethnic foods he is siding, so to speak, with the enemy, i.e., the nutritionist. Moreover, the very subject of his nostalgic statement is ironic: the eating of doves at weddings refers to romantic notions of love and happy marriage, notions which have long since disappeared from their lives. In a structural sense, too, the brevity and flatness of her husband's nostalgic comment evince an ironic contrast to his wife's memories, filled as they are with emotive sentimentality and expectation.

In her subsequent, weary argument with the nutritionist's whole point of view, the frustrated housewife explains, “After sixteen years of marriage I simply need some strength.” At this point the narrative voice, a voice sympathetic to the housewife throughout the story, describes the character's inner feelings as she speaks out: “Her voice sounded different than usual, an echo of days gone by, when she still considered herself something of value, someone whom all delighteth to honor.” The language of this emotive response evinces a variety of usages: *שלא כתדיר* (“different than usual”) and *משכבר* (“days gone by” — a recurring motif in Kahana-Carmon's works), both somewhat archaic and euphuistic are phrases which combine to express the housewife's sad sense of distance between the possibilities of “then” and the realities of “now.” And on the heels of this emphatic combination comes the familiar euphuism, borrowed, with a small variance, from Esth 6:6, *אשר* *הכל חפצים ביקרו* (“whom the King [here, “all”] delighteth to honor” — the words so ironically misunderstood and later forced upon the villainous Haman, after his sudden reversal, to declare publicly in praise of his rival,

Mordecai). The euphuistic phrase has a dual function in this psychological context: (1) it alludes, on the one hand, to a classic tale of expectation-turned-disappointment, and, on the other, to a story of near-tragedy-turned-celebration — thus providing an ironic background reflection of the housewife's plight; (2) the mock-heroic tone of the allusion both projects the motif of harsh decline in the housewife's fortunes and characterizes her once again as a rather helpless figure. She is constrained by the painful contrast of a stagnant present vis-à-vis an evocative past. The high-flown phrase becomes a stylistic device — an "emotive style"¹⁶ — used to highlight her pathetic situation.

The climax of dramatic irony in "To Build Her a House in the Land of Shinar" may be located in the government nutritionist's ensuing advice to the unhappy woman, that she take on a part-time job. "Just think," says the expert to the housewife, "an easier sort of life; I believe in being comfortable." The housewife's response is rendered partly by another euphuism (though, in English, it sounds like a cliché): "The housewife listened, but her heart was not in it." The euphuistic diction of *ולבה בל עמה* (taken from Prov 23:7) heightens the woman's emotiveness in contrast to the nutritionist's utterly superficial, impersonal solution. The housewife mocks this superficiality with a sarcastic response: "A new land, a new life, eh?" The phraseological doublet *חיים חדשים, ארץ חדשה* may be perceived as a kind of ideological cliché, a patriotic, frontier motto which — in the context of this story, at least — has lost both its magnetism and its viability. By converting the motto into an empty cliché, not only has the housewife struck back, though limply, at the nutritionist, she has also voiced her disdain toward the lofty — and fallacious — notion of heroic, frontier settlement. In this sense, her response expresses something far beyond the individual psyche: it is an intense, emotive protest levelled at fervid but shallow socio-political slogans, slogans which had promised (in the late fifties and early sixties) "redemption" and renewal in the new colonization of the Negev region. At its dramatic center, therefore, the story evinces a social sense which transcends the psychological focus of the narrative. This blend of a personal condition and its social ramifications is perhaps the most deliberate theme — and the most engaging tendency — in Kahana-Carmon's writings.

In the wake of the motto-turned-cliché comes the story's denouement. Night falls and the lights in the surrounding buildings begin to be extinguished. "Worlds go out in violet, worlds in grey. In line with the whitewash

16. This particular use of "emotive language" is reminiscent of S. Y. Agnon's style in the neo-romantic story "Bidmi yameyha." In this story, Agnon used euphuistic and archaic formations to evoke a lyrical—and ultimately ironic—tone of innocence and infatuation in characterization. On the stylistic characteristic called "emotive style," see Todorov (1971, pp. 36f).

tint. But the earth abideth forever." Interposed as it is in the narrative description without special markings, the direct quotation from Eccl 1:4, **והארץ לעולם עומדת** may be considered to be a *mālica*, a euphuistic expression denoting a timeless continuity, the unending sameness of things (according to its sense in the biblical context). Hence, both by way of allusion and by way of rhetoric, the phrase again accentuates the housewife's particular dilemma. She is doomed, the phrase connotes, to a continued sense of stagnation and hopelessness. Progress exists only in high-flown slogans, only in surface views of quasi-heroic potentialities. For her, nightfall, with its ominous tone of recurrent frustration, symbolizes only a fruitless, unchanging future.

The story's closing scene is replete with a final, devastating irony: the housewife, acting the part of conventional hostess and homemaker, serves tea and cake to her husband and her guest. Pointing one last time to the clash between inner and outer dimensions, the narrator again utilizes archaic expressions to highlight the housewife's feelings of helplessness—a linguistic coup de grâce, one could say, in the story's recurrent emphasis of an emotive inwardness: "The housewife wanted with all her might to say what was in her heart but could not find the words." Evincing both archaic and euphuistic characteristics, the phrases **חפצה בכל מאודה** ("wanted with all her might") and **לומר את אשר עם לבבה** ("to say what was in her heart") express the final, pathetic irony: not only does the poor woman not have the strength to protest, she even thinks to herself—at least as the narrator would have the reader perceive—in terms of empty, impotent clichés. Her victimization, one could infer, is thus complete.

Throughout the course of this brief narrative, clichés, archaisms, and euphuisms—the story's most salient stylistic devices—play a variety of roles. In very specific yet subtle ways, they contribute to the work's motif structure, to the characterization, to the overriding irony and sarcastic tone, and to the very organization of narrative materials. Taken together, therefore, these stylistic tools clearly constitute "expressive linguistic facts" which, by their "affective content,"¹⁷ focus the reader's attention on the psychological and underlying social senses of the text.¹⁸ By virtue of their being distributed over the whole body of narrative, these stylistic, phraseological units also reflect the story's rising and falling dramatic line. From the early expression "going down into the heart of the wilderness," to the pathetically climactic "A new land, a new life," and to the denouement helplessness of "wanted with all her

17. Giraud (1974, pp. 946f). Cf. Stankiewicz (1964), especially his remarks on expressiveness achieved "through the substitution of grammatical forms and constructions" (p. 243).

18. See Mukařovský (1964, pp. 18f) on utterance "foregrounding." He also notes how these foregrounded components contribute to the unity of the literary work (p. 21).

might"—each phrase has become an integral part of a whole, dramatic structure. Thus the "stylistic value"¹⁹ of these expressions is multilithic, subtly pervading, and aesthetically effective.

Before closing, some brief mention of the story's title would be fitting. "To Build Her a House in the Land of Shinar" (לבנות לה בית בארץ שנער) seems to bear within it at least three of the story's main motifs: "house" (בית)—as in כלכלת-בית, "home economics" or "domestic science," the government nutritionist's field of expertise; "land" (ארץ)—as in ארץ "חיים חדשים," the sardonic response of frustration on the part of the housewife; and "to build her a house" (לבנות לה בית), a phrase which evokes the story's general, ironic theme of frontier progressivism. The title also seems to project a certain exoticness, with Shinar (the biblical name for Babylonia) sounding somewhat like "Shangri-la." The clash between exotic, appealing possibilities and, desperate, personal realities further heightens the story's central irony and plaintiveness.

Actually, the name of the story reflects far more irony and sarcasm than those inherent in the motif structure. Borrowed directly from a particularly metaphorical prophetic text (Zech 5:11), the title refers to the prophet's vision of a symbolic exorcism: a female figure of "wickedness," set into a measure, is carried off to the distant land of Shinar—presumably connoting the prophet's message of the need to remove evil and to mend one's ways. Thus what on the surface appears to be a reference to a positive view of building and development (inherent in the settling of the Negev) becomes—once the title's origin is noted—the not so subtle suggestion of a moralistic admonition. Furthermore, beyond the thematic irony, the very form of the title takes on a special significance: as a direct, biblical quotation, the words *libnot lah bayit ba'erec šin'ar* constitute an archaic sort of utterance, a phrase which reverberates with the lofty diction and metaphorical imagism of prophetic passages.

In its very embodiment, through allusion, of an archaism, the title is joined both morphologically and semantically with the succession of similar phases in the ensuing text. The reader is thereby confronted continually—from the very beginning of the story and throughout its duration—with the work's dualistic design. In this particular story and in other works by Amalia Kahana-Carmon,²⁰ the semantic weight of these types of stylistic usages should not be underestimated.

19. Giraud (1974, p. 950).

20. This is especially true of the style and archaic motif design in *Vəyareah bə'emeq 'ayyalon*.

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