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The Ikea Catalog of Literature

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Panel: The Shape of Your Paragraph: Genre and Its Constraints

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Galit DAHAN CARLIBACH

The Ikea Catalog of Literature

I am a matryoshka doll of minorities: I am an Israeli, Jewish, Sephardic, female writer. I'm also called "Datlash" (a nickname for formerly religious people in Israel) and, according to my grandmother, I'm the only Moroccan loser woman who refuses to clean and cook fish to eat. So as the only person in this particular minority group, no human rights activists care about me, not even one!

But in fact, instead of complaining, I can use my matryoshka and join the great catalog of literature that exists in Israel—and, in fact, in any place. This Catalog has a special place for you—you only need to choose from fantasy, science-fiction, horror, political writing, and folklore. Sometimes the Catalog asks you to be more specific—and to define yourself according to your gender, race, origin, etc.

Beyond the fact that it's boring to belong to a catalog, this catalog is a danger to society because instead of containing everybody without a label, it will give them a limited place, rather than freedom. The catalog never includes marginalized individuals. The poet Wisława Szymborska said that her mistake was that instead of loving people, she loved humanity in general. The important thing is to recognize individuals. If we move outside of literature for a moment, in Israel I can see a phenomenon of many people being diagnosed as hyperactive, dyslexic, and so on, which was not the case 25 years ago. The diagnosing factory flourishes. The people I have observed pay to be diagnosed with something, but the people who really need this help are not in the game, and this seems unfair. How can those who need real assistance be referred differently?

Back to literature. Take, for example, the awful definition "women's literature." Now, at first glance it looks very liberal and modern. But think about it: Is there any men's literature? Did anyone ever hear about a man who writes from his loins? From his muscles?

Of course, as a woman, I am not claiming that the situation of women is perfect, or that there was never any discrimination, but I want to decide how and about what to write. In *Juvenilia* by Jane Austen, who wrote during a period in which women were only allowed to faint in every corner and ask for smelling salts, you meet a gallery of female characters who are excellent, funny, and tragic—and none of them "reflects the feminine womb." Alas! Not all the characters take part in a "Supreme Council of the Rights for Women."

Austen, as a great writer, wrote, first of all, as a writer—she favored art over an agenda, hard work over propaganda, and subtext over text. If we think about it further, we see that good books have no definition: What is the definition of Dickens's books? Did he write only from the perspective of a "social critic" seeking justice—he who, by the way, left his wife and children for a younger woman? Or Miguel de Cervantes—would his work be called fantasy? Poetry? Grotesque? What is the importance of labeling literature, at all, except to give a job to someone in academia?

As we can see, good literature does not require categorization. And this reminds me that my friend, a very religious person who read *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky, told me, "This chapter ("The Rebellion") proves that there is a god and that he is very religious." "Very interesting," I responded, "because I came to exactly the opposite conclusion."

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I admit that sometimes, when life becomes hard, I ponder the idea of joining activist writers. Everything would be easier. I would only need to say “politics and protest” and the audience would forgive me for all my cliché language and the overdose of folklore I use (unfortunately, I believe that nobody in the audience will notice this at all). In days like this, claims come to me not only from the Catalog but from my family itself: “Are you crazy? You created a character who is an alcoholic Moroccan grandmother? It’s known that Moroccans are very kind and hospitable; why does the grandmother plant cactus to ward off guests? How could the women in your novel be forbidden to marry? What is the duty of women if not to marry? Why don’t you describe our good food, instead?”

Well, I truly think that there already enough cookbooks on the shelf. And in regard to folklore, I can only remember what Nabokov wrote about Gogol: “When I want a good nightmare, I imagine Gogol penning in Little Russian dialect volume after volume of *Dikanka* and *Mirgorod* stuff about ghosts haunting the banks of the Dnieper, burlesque Jews, and dashing Cossacks.”