

FROM 'BURNING AIR' TO "DREAMING THE ACTUAL":

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Taught during the earliest days of the tumultuous rise of the women's movement in Israel, my course in Women in Literature at Ben Gurion University was considered so radical that I was interviewed by the radio and asked to speak about it at many milieus in Beersheba and elsewhere. Not surprisingly, then, when, as an outcome of that course, I noted that Israeli women poets were not included in collections of translations of Hebrew poetry into English and that it was time to make their voices available to English readers, my project -- undertaken with my students -- was greeted with surprise and not a little anxiety by most of the poets themselves. Why, they wanted to know, should women be represented into their own anthology? Would such an anthology be taken seriously, or would it marginalize them (who, indeed, were already marginalized by translators, at least)?

How profoundly different the reaction was in the 1990s when one of the writers urged me to do a new collection . For in the two decades that separated the two books (BURNING AIR AND A CLEAR MIND and DREAMING THE ACTUAL), awareness of the significance and importance of being a WOMAN writer -- as well as the status of the writers -- had radically changed. Not only were many of them writing narrative fiction rather than poetry -- for a host of cultural, social, as well as literary reasons -- but the recognition had dawned that, in the articulation of their own vision, women writers were revising and revisioning the the national understanding of the collective story by writing women's experience into it ; they were producing what I call an "alter/narrative" to that collective story. This presentation maps the change in self-understanding and in the status of women writers in Israel over the course of the two decades, from 1979-1999.