

"Everyone knows Yemenites are great in bed": The Correlation between the Density of a Woman's Pigment and the Title "Bimbo"¹

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Yonit Naaman

Translated by Rebecca Gillis and Yonit Naaman

My first day in first grade. The teacher, Rivka, seats me next to Sivan, Chen and Calanit; all three are blonde. My hair is black and very short, because I keep getting lice. I look like a boy. My father takes a picture of me with Calanit – a picture which I treasure for a long time afterwards as a moment when I came close to the ideal me. Mothers and fathers wander around the classroom, smiling heartily on Chen and Sivan, taking their photographs, side by side. Some of them exclaim with admiration: "Such dolls!" My mother says I have an 'exotic beauty'. This sounds like a compliment, but of a dubious kind. Why exotic, actually? I'm a girl, not a papaya! I have always known that I don't want that sort of beauty, especially not as some kind of consolation prize. The foreign scent wounds me, for I was born right here, exactly like Sivan and Calanit. I want conventional, that is Ashkenazi² beauty, white with freckles. I want to turn red when it is cold and get my neck sunburned after a sports class in the sun. But because I am an exotic fruit, I actually become even darker in the sun. My father is a true Yemenite; nobody can doubt I am his daughter, because I look just like him, only paler. "It's better for a girl to be white", old ladies she meets in the street explain to my mother in Ladino. I am sprawled in a baby carriage with my eldest brother's eyes suspended wonderingly above me. Unfortunately for him, he turned out much less white than me. He may not know Ladino, but he understands every word they say. Absolute strangers often ask me: "Whom do you love more, your Yemenite father or your Turkish mother?" After hesitating a bit I reply: "My Yemenite father." I want them all to know, I identify with the underdog.

In the summer vacation between ninth and tenth grade, Grandma Saida died in a depressing nursing ward of some old folks home. I was always put off by her, because she had such a Yemenite name, smell and style of dress. Her visits to our neighborhood made me extremely uncomfortable, not least because of her uncanny

resemblance to Zion Cohen's embarrassing grandmother in Galila Ron-Feder's book *Zion and Batya*. At her *shiv'ah* I meet the entire tribe. For the first time in my life I encounter dishes with particularly exotic names; for the first time in my life I am surrounded by so many people who look like my father, like his brothers, like me. During that week I saw how relations from my mother's side look down on my Yemenite aunts and their ways. During that week I learned that you can eat till you are bursting and then throw up in the toilet. During that week I was almost sorry that I didn't pronounce the letters "*chet*" and "*ayin*" like my cousins. A few weeks later I traveled with them to Eilat to visit Auntie Micky. The cousins talked excitedly about Zohar Argov and were horrified to find out that I'd never heard of him. I find myself caught in a huge dilemma: I love the cousins, but I do not wish to be like them. To be on the safe side, I try to walk a few steps behind when we go to town. Lag behind. That way maybe nobody will realize I belong with them, the *Mizrachim*³. As if I were created of different material, as if I do not look like one.

I want people to be unable to tell. Fortunately, a short while after I began high school my father started selling books. If not, how would I have coped with being the offspring of a cloth merchant? My sense of worth already shrank next to daughters of pilots, lawyers, doctors and career army officers. I don't want people to see. I must already prove that my English is good enough, that I read books, that I come from a good family. There are fourteen classes in my grade in high school. Somehow it works out that most of the students in the general studies classes come from the fancy neighborhoods of Savion and Neve Monoson, while most of the students in the vocational classes come from Yahud. How can one tell I'm from Yahud? Very simple. There are hardly any *Mizrachim* in Savion, and in Neve Monoson too it would be difficult to find girls who look like me. And how do I look? I'm dark and have curly hair. Once, in eleventh grade, during a fight which got out of hand, someone called me 'nigger'. Loads of times, in the heat of a fight, I would call my brother, my own flesh and blood, the same insulting name, and he would gloat over me with unconcealed triumph: idiot, you are also nigger. Maybe, but you're more so!

We were both hit in the same accident. The social mark of Cain is branded on our foreheads, and there is no escape. Cosmeticians often recommend fabulous creams to lighten my skin. Hairdressers offer me hair straighteners. Somehow, without my uttering the slightest dissatisfaction, it is obvious to many people that my external appearance needs improvement, and that I need to be replaced with someone

else. Perhaps more *Ashkenazi* looking? The correlation between beauty and the whiteness of one's skin, like the correlation between Israeliness and *Ashkenaziness*, destroy the chances for comfort inside the skin in which I emerged into this world. But why, really? In the neighborhood where I grew up, we were the majority, and Yahud's homes are populated by boys and girls in various shades of brown. The answer is obvious: the economy of color in the Israeli market is thoroughly entrenched, even in an almost homogeneous environment. Most homes have television, and even in black and white you can tell who is black and who is white. It is easy to position yourself in the feasibility charts. No wonder, therefore, that in the jungle of identifications I was somewhat comforted by my ability to perfectly imitate the face from the record cover of the wonder girl Lilach, or to recite the poem "A Good Girl" by A. A. Milne. Just like in the program *Zipper*. So what if I don't have a grandmother in a kibbutz? I also want to be salt of the earth! But my impersonations, like the remains of chewed food in a broad celluloid smile, are exposed in expressions and gestures in performances which do not fit the stereotype of my ethnic origins, which is likely to annoy people wherever I go. Thus, the Israeli economy of color gives rise to an anomaly: I am an ape rather than a human being.

During my high school years the link between the density of pigment and social stigma became more pronounced than ever. My greatest fear was to be considered a bimbo. The use of the terms lout and bimbo as opposed to nerd and freak became widespread. My greatest fear was to be tainted with the bimbo insult. It soon became clear that louts and bimbos only exist among the Orientals, *Mizrachim*. Somehow, each attempt to be funny or represent ineloquence was accompanied by a *Mizrachi* accent. I dreaded that in the initial selection I would fall to the bottom of the ladder, to the epistemological category of ethnic inferiority, populated by louts and bimbos. Once, when I was watching television with my best friend and her mother, there, in an *Ashkenazi* living room, *Mizrachi* women in traditional dress suddenly appeared on the screen. I squirmed uncomfortably even before the ululations commenced, louder and louder, mingling with the sounds of laughter and mockery which over-came my best friend. If only I had had the remote control, I would have saved myself the heartache caused by the apparent betrayal of my best friend and my own increasing self-disgust. Lululululululei!!! Sometimes, when I am in a minority, I try to make myself heard. I assume that if I make my voice heard, I will be able to begin a categorical subversion, which will dissolve the wall of suspicion. At times,

even in the supermarket, I speak to my little brother about current affairs, or the nutritious value of vegetarian sausages. He does not listen, but I choose my elegant words carefully, pronounce them loudly and clearly, so that the *Ashkenazi* woman walking past us will know that we are made of the right stuff. It is tiring to have to prove one's innocence all the time. It is tiring always to be the object of suspicion.

Once, one of my best friends' father said that he had always dreamt of marrying a Yemenite girl. In the end, of course, he married a kibbutznic, salt of the earth, because only the good girls are good enough for our pilots, and also because his parents would have had a heart attack if he would dared to stain their racial pedigree. Order must be maintained. At the time I considered his revealing confession about the desirable Yemenite girl a kind of compliment. In retrospect, the lesson of this confession, that desire is one thing, but actions are another, makes me sick. A pilot with eyes in his head had better not confuse the mound in his pants with the benefit of the individual. Too often, people would refer to the color of my skin or to my family background. From time to time someone feels the need to share with me his insights into the role of the Yemenite in some field or other: "Yemenites are great in bed", someone in the know once said to me. I was forced to cope with this double disrespect to my body and to understand that I cannot but be a bimbo. Like the baby who was whiter than her brother when I was in the pram, exposed to the esthetic verdict of the tribal elders, as a young girl my body was thrown into a minefield of predictions, assessments and statements. The interest which my color aroused in white surroundings made me conduct myself particularly humble. Tight jeans, décolleté, Zohar Argov, sex and makeup were all out of the question. Too often I was ashamed of something, and did not always understand of what or why. I did not want to be seen at all. I was forced into exile from my own body as an inevitable result of the unbearable compulsion which marked me far and wide in a space as a bimbo. I toured the regions of anorexia and bulimia, and in the end gained a permanent footing in a place where many women find comfort: I ate. I ate and ate, in order to burst, to emerge of my skin, to break the bounds of flesh, to be diffused, to distance myself from myself and from my sexual demarcation which had become one and the same. In literature classes in high school I discovered Hebrew poetry, particularly that written by men, utterly *Ashkenazi*.

Nathan Alterman, Meir Wieseltier and Nathan Zach reinforced my admiration for white sources and my need to make my racial marks disappear. Thus, long before

bimbo-chic came back into fashion, at a time when the appellation bimbo could only be a searing insult, I studied Wieseltier's poem "Another Shakespearean Sonnet", of which I was very fond. I loved it so much that I learned it by heart and would quote it at every opportunity, because I was utterly devoted to the idea of the bimbo as a label which marked me and my dark sisters as having a warm, available, promiscuous, titillating body. Ridiculous as it might seem, my exile from my own body involved an adherence to the opposite point of view: male and racist. My admiration of the poem was devoid of all criticism or identification, and enabled me to exclude myself from the generality of bimbos. I identified without hesitation with the one who sacrificed me on the altar of the body, Meir Wieseltier, poet and Israel Prize laureate.

Another Shakespearean Sonnet

Tell me gentle little slut
Is there any chance your innocent gaze
Trembling brown, veiled with pearl
And your birdlike, warm neck
And your two shoulders slowly heaving
Above a pair of budding breasts
(But firm, poking at the cloth
With mild beaks, like peas)
And the trembling silky surface of your belly
Revealed from the secret hidden places of chafing
And your immeasurably tanned thighs
And your buttoned up ass rising
From your tattered little jeans
Is there a chance that they will screw me?⁴

The poem, as its title suggests, is written in Shakespearean sonnet form. Wieseltier, schooled in the English tradition, has created a proper Shakespearean sonnet structurally and musically, a sonnet whose content echoes Shakespeare's best known sonnets. In the twenty six Sonnets in which Shakespeare addresses the Dark Lady, he parodies the Petrarchan tradition which praises the beauty of the fair lady with eyes like the sun, snowy breasts and coral lips, and instead he praises the Dark Lady's unique beauty, using straightforward language and rhyme. You would think that here was an opportunity to be seen. But Wieseltier's address to the "lady" is no

different from the normative Israeli attitude to women of this kind. The poem does not depict her, nor does it express affection, sympathy, respect or appreciation. At best, it takes its place with the rest of the insights I had gathered unwillingly from *Ashkenazi* men's observations about women like me.

The poem, which opens by addressing the young girl, is in fact an inventory, an enumeration of the list of organs which comprise the bimbo. Against the overall deliberate and characteristic scorn, the bimbo's gentleness stands out, as she is a miniature bimbo, who otherwise would not have attracted such concentrated attention from the man gazing upon her. This fact raises, of course, further pondering about the economy of color, the dynamics of desire within the spectrum of brownness. The poem reads from the point of view of the speaker, who examines the girl with a penetrating gaze --- from head to toes --- and delineates her unique features. The bimbo is not a body, but a collection of organs: shoulders, neck, breasts, stomach, thighs, and ass. The poet's gaze is the exception to the rule. The bimbo is appreciated with a look establishing full control in space; a gaze through which rational creatures communicate; a penetrating look which could be defined as the gateway to the soul. But, all he gives her is a 'naive' look, passive, motiveless, not wise, not tender, not evil --- just naive. Naiveté is the trademark of the young bimbo, and implies that she is easy prey, just like a bird falling victim to a well- equipped hunter. The bird metaphor, embodied in the neck and breasts, evokes vulnerability, but at the same time challenges the girl's being human, and undermines her rationality. The breasts poking at the cloth of her shirt indicate that her body is speaking rather than her. Her existence is instinctive, animal-like, and lacks freedom or ability to choose.

So what makes a bimbo? Ofra Hazah's popular songs provide one answer, but the question might also be answered by paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir: a bimbo does not make, she is made. All means are conscripted to her creation as an object: she has neither voice nor name, and is immobile. Apart from a slight tremor in her stomach, the girl in the poem stands completely still, subjected to the gaze of the man, who constructs her at his will as the body of a bimbo, having only one purpose. Against this background, the last (14th) line of the poem is by no means surprising. One almost expects it, as the gaze which dissects the entity of the bimbo to a sum total of organs can only converge in one place. Is it incidental that the rhyme pattern (ABAB CDCD EFEF)⁵ inevitably advances to a G spot? I cannot overlook the subtle irony which is typical of Wieseltier's poetics, and embodied here in the title the

structure and the words "is there a chance". Nor am I unaware of his blatant sexism, and even more than a shred of misogyny. Wieseltier may be writing a Shakespearean sonnet, but he subverts the structural convention by ending it with a question. He is in dialogue with the Dark Lady materials in aggrandizing the woman's body while at the same time belittling it. He brings Shakespeare's intimated pornography to a point of consummation. The poem constructs a barricade with the (male) speaker on one side -- all gaze, pure awareness, freewill --- and the (female) object of his desire on the other --- all body. And not just a body: a youthful, tanned body with a fine neck, young breasts and a smooth stomach. The only movement permitted this body in the poem is the stomach's tremor, which is attributed to the girl's desire. This is intimately connected to the ethnic aspect which arises in the poem: the bimbo is a *Mizrachi* girl; in addition to her description, her tanned thighs and brown eyes give her away. In linking the amalgam of the essence of bimboness, with traits such as simplicity (not to mention lightheartedness), desire and drives, Wieseltier aligns himself with a splendid orientalist tradition. Most like black women for white American men, or Island women for European colonialists, *Mizrachi* women in Israel are labeled by *Ashkenazi* men as a sexual site of surging passion, a sloppy Lolita-like sexuality is often created by the male gaze upon minors. The bimbo in our case is a minor, as her budding breasts indicate, and so in Wieseltier's lusting gaze, which is accompanied by mine, sin is piled on sin and becomes a crime.

I am ape first, person second. I am exiled from my own body, and from the height of Wieseltier's shoulders I gaze, like him, at the bimbo, almost rejoicing at her downfall. The final line indeed brings the drama to a climax, but is entirely unsurprising. The question raised first in the second line, is eventually resolved in the fourteenth. The tension built up in the three quatrains remains. Unlike the typical Shakespearean sonnet, this sonnet's close does not bring relief and does not provide an answer. In phonological opposition to the diphthong ending the word "*sicui*" (chance) which has a double motion, wavering between two options, the word "*iti*" (with me) which rhymes with "*smartuti*" (little rag) ends in motion, all open, all possible. The concluding line of the poem contains an Israeli lesson, which fits with the question discussed throughout. In contrast with the Shakespearean tradition, the question is not at all abstract, and does not deal with the merits of friendship or other esthetic matters. And so? Wonders the reader at the open ending of the poem, will she let him fuck her or not? Of course she will, I asserted, accelerating the end between

the wavering options, providing a clear answer to the open end of the poem. Who would not want to have sex with the god-sent poet? Who would not seek to fulfill herself through the male body, to throw her body into the experienced, strong arms which know the work? In those days, reading the poem over and over again, I reached its end full of desire and violence. I heard no voice acknowledging the possibility of resistance. In those days I silenced every disruptive tone. I had no doubt that the answer had to be: Yes sir, I would be all too happy to let you fuck me.

My question as to which came first, my *Mizrachiness*, or the woman that I am, remains unanswered. Both because I lack information as to the true value of any definition, if there be such, and because the oppression which I experience is absorbed into the woman's body and the *Mizrachi* body to the same extent and at the same time. The incriminating sign is branded in flesh which is brown, female, that of a brown woman. On the other hand, I know where to locate the beginnings of awakening. It too budded in the *Mizrachi* body. My eyes were opened after my army service, which entailed rehabilitation of the ruins left by the *Ashkenazi* establishment, as a teacher of *Mizrachi* "Rafal's boys". No longer ape first, person second. The new *Mizrachi* discourse to which I was exposed enabled me to stand tall and provided me with an alternative. I was released from the trap of bimbohood later on. My redemption lay overseas, in African-American feminism in the United States, which allowed me renewed ownership of my body and brought me back from a long exile to the relative comfort of a home inside my own skin. Bell Hooks, Alice Walker, Cherrie Moraga, Tony Morrison and others revealed to me the sources of strength in the body of a woman who is not white. Thanks to them, I no longer obey the command to embody anything. With their help I refuse to align myself with an assessment based on flesh; I create an alternative, undetermined feasibility rating, and discipline the vicissitudes of the spectrum of brownness at my own will. This feminine discourse enables me to relive with resistance my memories from first grade, the games in the lobby of the red building of the "Neighborhood Development" center, and, most importantly, from the Yahud General High School, the arena of the conflict between bimbos and good white girls, the outcome of which was all too predictable.

My mother says that mine is an "exotic beauty". It sounds like a compliment, but one of a dubious kind. I have always known that I did not want this kind of beauty, especially not as a consolation prize. I was born right here, and I want conventional beauty, that is *Ashkenazi* beauty, to be white with freckles. I want to turn

red when it is cold, and to get my neck sunburned after a sports class in the sun. But because I am an exotic fruit, I actually become even darker in the sun. Hey you, brown girl. It's entirely up to you: you can be part of any group you choose. If you sit with the angelic blond dolls, some of their glory may rub off on you. But you can also sit with your adorable brown sisters. You really are so adorable. When you grow up, you can become bimbos. When you grow up, you will need to wax your moustache, tidy your eyebrows open your legs and straighten your curls. But please try to keep your mouths shut.

¹In Hebrew: "Freh'a" – a title based on the Arabic words meaning 'chick' and 'happiness'; a personal name, mainly given to Israeli women of Oriental origin in the 50s. Later, it became a derogatory appellation, analogous to "bimbo", especially for young women from lower statuses.

² Jews of European origin; From the German word 'Jacke'= jacket (referring to the German immigrants always wearing jackets even in the summer heat).

³ Jews of Oriental origin, mostly from North Africa, Yemen, Iraq and Iran.

⁴ Meir Wieseltier, *Sent Out to Sea (Motsa el Ha-Yam)*, Tel Aviv 1981, p.41 [Hebrew]. Translated by Rebecca Gillis, with author's permission.

⁵ It should be noted that the rhyme system is not adhered to in the English translation.