National Identity in Global Times: Therapy and Satire in Contemporary Israeli Film and Literature

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INTRODUCTION

Most research on contemporary Israel acknowledges the dramatic changes that Israel went through in the late eighties. The narrative is by now familiar and shares a great deal with other countries going through similar changes. Since the 1980s Israel has been on an increasingly quick and thorough track of economic and cultural privatization. This manifests itself in the weakening of state influence in economic and cultural fields, and has visible influence on all spheres of society. This paper does not aim to survey all these changes but concentrates on those that have exerted the most influence on identity issues and everyday experience, especially the relationship with the state. Fewer and fewer Israelis work for the state or experience the world through the state’s apparatus. This is evidenced by the thorough privatization of the communication and media industry. In 1986, Israel had one state television channel; however, in 1993 it had 60 (Soffer 215–56). Internet, of course, joins television in providing possibilities for connection and exposure to knowledge that go well beyond the purview of the state. Privatization has come hand in hand with globalization, which has condensed time and space and created a close proximity with various relevant others such as “the German” or the “the Arab,” who were, until the onset of globalization, vague and ideological figments lacking in reality. For example, up until the 1980s Most Israelis referred to the people in the occupied territories as Arabs, not Palestinians (Brenner). Aside from intelligence officers and orientalists, no one had a clue as to their own political organization or internal differences (Peleg and Waxman). Aside from intelligence officers and orientalists, no one had a clue as to their own political organization or internal differences (Peleg and Waxman). Today most Jewish-Israelis know leaders and parties by face and name. Before the 1980s Israelis only reluctantly visited Germany; today there is a steady flow of Israelis choosing Berlin as their permanent home (Oz-Salzberger). I claim here that the weakening of the state and the proximity of various “others” have created a space to therapeutically intervene or satirize the figures which represent the state and its ideals; the soldier, the state agent, the politically committed writer, but also the nationalist mother who brings them up. In what follows I will analyze five ideal types that challenge national identity in typical ways (Weber 90). The representative works that this article deals with are
Amos Oz’s *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Eitan Fox’s *Walk on Water*, Yoram Kaniuk’s *Bastards*, Orly Castle-Bloom’s *Dolly City* and Sayed Kashua’s *Arab Labor*. I would like to start with Amos Oz’s therapeutic intervention in the identity of the pioneer and the persona of the writer.

**THE NEW JEW: THE ISRAELI IMAGINARY**

Amos Oz occupies a special place in Hebrew literature. Oz is the most prominent living Hebrew writer in Israel and the best selling Israeli author abroad. He is also an influential political essayist and commentator both in Israel and around the world. Alongside his very considerable talent and writing genius, Oz’s initial domestic success was due to the way in which he personally embodied classical Zionist ideals of the masculine committed writer. A good-looking Kibbutznik and soldier, tough and masculine on the outside with a Chekov-like humanist sensitivity on the inside, his public image functions like Lacan’s register of the imaginary (Lacan 122–23). Just as the child uses his mirror image in order to create a pleasing and coherent sense of self out of chaotic self-perceptions, just so does the image of Amos Oz provide a likeable idealized mirror image which can tie together the very chaotic mutually warring attributes of Israeli identity, its humanism and military masculinity, into one coherent and attractive picture. Oz’s recent writing, however, transcends his public image and undermines it. *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Oz’s highly acclaimed autobiography, engages in a rewriting and reinterpretation of the meaning of Zionist national identity. Oz deconstructs the traditional Zionist narrative prevalent until the 1980s. This narrative has Diaspora Jewry immigrating—ascending to Palestine where its members are quickly transformed into productive and pragmatic pioneers and soldiers. Oz ironically describes the image of the pioneer he had as a child:

I pictured these pioneers as strong, serious, self-contained people [. . . .]. They were capable of loneliness and introspection, of living outdoors, sleeping in tents, doing hard labor [. . . .] they could ride wild horses or wide tracked tractors; they spoke Arabic, knew every cave and wadi, had a way with pistols and grenades, yet read poetry and philosophy; they were large men with inquiring minds and hidden feelings. [. . . .] They are stamping their mark on the landscape and on history, they are plowing fields and vineyards, they are writing a new song, they pick up their guns, mount their horses, and shoot back at the Arab marauders: they take our miserable human clay and mold it into a fighting nation. (5–6)

Oz intervenes to rewrite the story of Zionism. Through his autobiography, the national narrative of the heroic transformation from traditional Jewry toward a new
masculinity, of heroic soldering and nation-building, becomes the story of displacement and immigration. Oz’s parents and their surrounding milieu in Jerusalem are portrayed in the novel as being painfully rejected by Europe. His father, a nebbish Jewish intellectual, tries to compensate for this rejection by talking the heroic pioneering talk, but in life he is a modest librarian. His mother, essentially a highly cultivated, Jewish, cosmopolitan European is not Zionist at all; she is unable to cope with or compensate for the experience of rejection and loss that came with immigration. She remains hostile to her surroundings, continues to read in the five European languages she knows and is inconsolable regarding her extended family that has perished in Europe. Oz’s mother eventually committed suicide when Oz was twelve. Oz reacts by leaving his father and Jerusalem and moving to a Kibbutz where he attempts to be the new, pioneering Jew. In the Kibbutz, however, Oz shows himself to be marginal, the weak, Jewish intellectual who gets picked on and beaten by the stronger boys—not at all the ideal of the pioneer. Thus, the novelistic depiction of both the young Oz and his parents negates the national ideals.

We can rearticulate this deconstruction in a more precise theoretical and historical manner. As a reaction to anti-Semitism, Zionism generates a split between the old Jew as displaced victim and the new Jew as a rooted, collective farmer-soldier. Oz negates this split between New Jew and Old Jew, between diaspora and homeland, and reveals their continuity. Oz undoes Zionist denials of weakness and displacement, and shows national Zionist identity as ideological compensation lacking in reality. He disrupts this dichotomy, bridges the split and reveals the continuity of the New Jew with the Old Jew. To understand his intervention one can profit from using Melanie Klein’s famous description of the infant defensively splitting between good object and bad object. According to her theory, in defending against the frustrations of being breast fed, the child splits the object, the mother, into a good and bad mother (so that she/he can still have an uncontaminated good object to attach to). It is only at a later stage, where the child learns to fuse them together, that he reaches a “depressive” mature position where good and bad intermix. In just the same way Oz would like us to fuse the Old and New Jew, more precisely to accept and see the Old Jew inside the New Jew. Oz teaches the acceptance of fragility and weakness. It is exactly the portrayal and acceptance of his parents as displaced persons in Palestine rather than pioneers, and himself as a distinctly bookish, Jewish intellectual that opens up a space to rewrite the story of the nation, to undo the rigid, compulsive excess of ideology. How are we to judge this new continuity between the Old and New Jew?

The very ambiguity of the new figure, the combined Old/New Jew, precludes any one single interpretation. One approach will surely claim that presenting the New Jew as displaced and victimized just continues a classic strand of Zionism that seeks support and legitimization through victimhood status. This approach
will posit the continuity with the Old Jew as a way of distancing Israeli identity from its increasingly strong association with the Arab-Israeli conflict. It attempts to re-create legitimization at a time of growing delegitimization and critique. Essentially Oz is saying to both his domestic and European readers that he himself is a displaced-cosmopolitan, European Jew, a persona preferable to that of the Israeli citizen whose image has been tarnished by its involvement in occupation and war. Although such an image seeks to create legitimization on the global stage, it does not mesh well with the classical values of Zionism that stress an active autonomous rootedness.

Globalization, the weakening of the state, and the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict conflate to distance the writer from portraying himself and his characters as active citizens. Oz is a very global writer in a country with a very small domestic market; most of his readers are, by now, not Israelis. His writing is increasingly geared toward the international market and, as such, it internalizes the perspective of the international reader. In Oz’s writing the implied global reader is no less important than the domestic reader. This creates a text that is essentially a double text, a text that is designed almost like a hologram to be looked at from two different points of view: the domestic and the global. Domestically it is designed to give a positive mirroring experience while globally it is aimed at mediating the national narrative to a global audience. Both demands have led to a rejection of a citizen-solider persona and the adoption of a kind of Diaspora Jewish identity. Indeed, Oz’s current writing typifies a third cultural phase in Israeli culture. If the first phase is marked by a culture geared toward state building usually by assuming the style of socialist realism, and the second expresses statehood normalcy with high modernism, then the third phase is marked by a distinctly Jewish cosmopolitanism and globalism. Thus diaspora-cosmopolitan discourse prepares subjects for globalization, which reveals itself negatively as lacking agency and autonomy on the domestic plane with a heightened opportunity on the global plane. Oz’s intervention in the acceptance and valorization of displaced and uprooted Jewish identity has had as its positive surplus the affirmation of a culture-based cosmopolitan ethos. To summarize, one can say that the proximity, reliance, and internalization of the global reader ultimately result in a transformation of identity. A displaced/cosmopolitan Jewish identity is constructed and affirmed under the internalization of the gaze of the other. A fascinating variation between self-transformation of identity and its relations with the other can be analyzed in recent Israeli films that intervene in the present rather than rewriting the past. A highly illuminating example is the film Walk on Water.
Walk on Water is the story of Eyal, an intelligence agent/hit man whose wife has recently committed suicide. As a result of her suicide the agency decides to give him a less challenging assignment: to find an aging Nazi war criminal and kill him “before God does.” Eyal’s assignment is to pose as a tour guide and befriend Axel and Pia, the former Nazi’s adult grandchildren, who are on a visit to Israel. Axel is a gay schoolteacher: warm-hearted, friendly and spiritual. Eyal takes him around Israel: they visit a Kibbutz and the Sea of Galilee. They bathe in the Dead Sea, shower, make a fire together, and visit Jerusalem. Eyal who is very emotionally repressed and unable to cry, opens up to Axel. However, he is also frustrated by the assignment that he deems a waste of time when he could be assassinating terrorists. Axel flies back home to Germany. Eyal’s boss insists that Eyal finish the job and thus he too flies to Germany for Axel’s father’s birthday party. At the party the aging, Nazi grandfather is suddenly introduced (flown in from South America). Eyal attempts to kill him, but he is unable to go through with it; he breaks down crying and hugging Axel and says “I cannot kill anymore.” Two years later we see Eyal married to Axel’s sister Pia, a happy new father living on the Kibbutz.

Similar to Oz’s autobiography, the basic narrative can be productively interpreted as a kind of therapeutic intervention in Israeli identity. In its own way this intervention also tries to recreate continuity with the past that comes about through a meeting with the other, this time the German other. While for Oz this other is internalized as the implicit global reader, in Walk on Water it is projected into the narrative itself. The film in actuality represents the nation to the gaze of the other both in terms of its actual distribution and audience and its narrative. The film thus responds to the economic-psychic compression and proximity that globalization entails. The other of the nation (in this case Germany) is involved in all aspects of cultural production from funding the film to its premiere not in Israel, but in the Berlin International Film Festival. This intimate involvement with the other cannot sustain an isolated national identity partially based on the othering of the German and the Arab. The film thus represents a therapeutic intervention in a problematic, psycho-national orientation whose etiological source is explicitly presented as a reaction to anti-Semitism, essentially an “abusive” relationship.

The therapeutic intervention entails revisiting this relationship with an empathic other. In fact the relationship between Eyal and Axel works very much like a queer variant of the therapeutic process described in Freud’s “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-through.” Although exhibiting resistance to his therapy most markedly as a result of his repressed homosexual urging and resultant homophobia, Eyal starts confiding with Axel about his relationship with his now dead
wife, and about his experience as a child of Holocaust survivors. He gets to know a sensitive young German with whom he speaks quite openly about homosexuality and he visits a new Germany. Meeting Axel is made plausible by globalization but it is also, like all films, a wish fulfillment, a fantasy of being cured and taken care of by the other. Axel allows Eyal to transform himself from the embodiment of a certain kind of warring, national ethic to a more open and progressive national ideal. He goes from being hyper-masculine, defensive, isolationist and violent to a soft, maternal fatherhood, a communality marked by living in the Kibbutz and a transnational openness signaled by his hybrid German-Israeli family. From a certain kind of masculinist, security-oriented “closed” Zionist he is transformed into one of its “open” and “out” (queer connotation intended), left-wing conceptions. The film in short espouses a new relationship with the big, German other. Although the film ends with a heteronormative couple it is clear that Eyal’s real relationship was with Axel. A clenched and violent national identity is represented as hetero-normative: after all, Eyal sticks a poisonous phallic needle in the people he assassinates—he has a phallus that kills. His cure conversely involves being penetrated psychically by the German other, with the viewers positing an implicit sexual encounter.

Characteristically for Israeli film since the 1990s this refiguring of national identity is achieved using the global formula of a Hollywood film, in this case the American buddy film, in which two people of the same sex with contrasting personalities are paired. This American genre is then fused and transformed “glocally” to arrive at this new hybrid form: an Israeli national-identity-buddy-film thriller. Indeed, various hybrid formats have the working out of trauma as their narrative core and prove highly successful in the international film market. Examples include Waltz with Bashir, a film which deals with the massacre at Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut in 1982, the television series Chatufim which narrates the homecoming of prisoners of war, a series that was bought by the 21st Century Fox and became Homeland, as well the series BeTipul which became In Treatment. The therapeutic national narrative formula achieves not only glocal creativity, transforming global forms to suit local tastes but fascinatingly, has been recreated at the very center, signaling that Israeli writers and filmmakers are not only re-writing the nation using global forms but that their productions have a global appeal.

The therapeutic national narrative source of strength is, as I have claimed, double; it mirrors as it explains, it gives an intelligible narrative of trauma and its symptoms, and a coherent personification of the nation as person. As we have seen, the narrative usually unfolds as a national Oedipal conflict. In this story, the first generation is the Holocaust generation or the displaced generation with attendant symptoms, the second is the macho, Zionist generation explicitly rejecting the first generation’s way of life while internalizing their wish for empowerment. This narrative of course is a highly revisionist perspective on historical truth since the sol-
dierly, masculine, Zionist generation and the displaced generations were often two discreet groups of the same generation. There is something too tidy about this narrative. It often brings together in the same family experiences that do not really belong together. More often than not, the survivors’ displaced family did not generate the masculine soldier in the next generation, while the ideal soldier’s family never felt displaced or victimized. Less conservative narratives, to which I shall turn now, display dissociation between victimization and violence between the Holocaust and Arab-Israeli conflict. The first does not directly “explain” the second, but provides an ominous background for the contemporary narrative. Narratives of parody and madness reside not in a coherent explanation but rather in the gaps and dissociations inherent in the national story.

NARRATIVES OF PARODY, MADNESS AND DISINTEGRATION

In his analysis of the field of literary production, Pierre Bourdieu sets an important place for parody:

It is significant that breaks with the most orthodox works of the past, i.e. with the belief they impose on newcomers, often take the form of parody, which presupposes and confirms emancipation. In this case, the newcomers “get beyond” the dominant mode of thought and expression not by explicitly denouncing it, but by repeating and reproducing it in a sociologically non-congruent content, with the effect of rending it incongruous or even absurd, simply by making it perceptible as the arbitrary convention it is. (The Field of Cultural Production 31)

Indeed, such narratives do not seek to explain what exists or intervenes therapeutically, but rather to effect a transformation in identity through parody, critique, and shock.

An excellent representative of this genre is Yoram Kaniuk’s work. Kaniuk was born in Tel Aviv in 1930. At the age of seventeen he joined the para-military unit Palmach, and fought and was wounded during the ‘48 war. Known for their iconoclastic, grotesque themes and morbid humor, his novels are described as deviating from the national consensus, and only recently received acclaim by the general public. The work that I would like to examine here is a novel called Nevelot that literally designates corpse or cadaver but is used colloquially to mean bastards. Nevelot is a story of a group of retired, aging men who have been friends since their joint service in the Palmach in the war of 1948. They have been sitting around the same café for the last thirty years, watching today’s youth parading in front of them in a gentrified trendy street in Tel Aviv. They envy and resent the youths’ over-sexualized appearance, their thoroughly narcissistic, selfish, commercialized existence, and their lack of respect and knowledge of the achievements and sacri-
fices that went into creating the state. One morning one of them utters the word Nevelot (bastards) and their resentment congeals into action. They start a killing spree of youths, snuffing the life out of what they consider an overly hedonistic Tel Avivian nightlife. Rather than explaining violence and masculinity as a response to the trauma of the past, it is explained through resentment, in this case resentment toward liberal, post-nationalist youth. Rather than taking on a compassionate, generative stance in old age, they choose to reaffirm an almost Nietzschean will to power, a principle of “might makes right.” There is nothing apologetic, nothing that tries to justify or explain. As the narrator explicitly says, “only the winners get to tell their story.” The novel’s protagonist thus presents the spirit of the classical solider-citizen of the past that comes to haunt the commercial present. The reaffirmation of masculinist-nationalist violence and the virtues that went along with it, such as male bonding, courage, and sacrifice are fleshed out as sheer madness in the commercial-civil, society atmosphere of Tel Aviv.

There is no possibility to re-instate the original values that accompanied the state’s foundation. The story can be fruitfully contrasted with films like Walk on Water. Instead of touching the traumatic past in order to cure the present, to make it more amenable to reality, it reaches back to a warring past in order to show its irrelevance, its sheer craziness. With a first person narrator who uses paramilitary army slang from the ’50s, who is rough, violent and ill mannered, Kaniuk undermines idealized versions of the ’48 war and the Israeli elite who participated in it. In a way Kaniuk highlights the two very different subjectivities that Israel constructs, the commercial code which stresses self-expression, sexual desire and fashion, and an easy affection coupled with lack of true attachment to other people, vs. the military code of warring citizenship which stresses true loyalty, courage, and violence.

Like Walk on Water, masculine soldierly identity is seen as needing revision, but the very way in which this subjectivity is articulated is different. Walk on Water does not view the citizen-solider (a Mossad agent) as an illusionary projection of displaced Jews (the way Tale of Love and Darkness does) but it does take the pains to explain and justify this persona. First by the suicide bombings that form the background of Axel’s visit to Israel and, of course, by Eyal’s being himself a son of Holocaust survivors. With Kaniuk, the citizen-solider is not explained away as an illusion or necessary evil, but affirmed and negated at the same time. Affirmed, since this persona exhibits values that otherwise have no place in contemporary civil society, values such as sacrifice, true friendship, and courage, but at the same time there is something indiscriminately evil and violent about these same values, values which entail something demonic and necessarily create a violent de-humanization of the other. The extreme lack of control and violent behavior of the protagonist arouses various affects, among them the sudden, (comic) release of (comic) tension. There is something ridiculous about the lack of control of a
person in a fit of rage; like other comical effects it is the result of something “low” or repressed suddenly being revealed. However, when this violence has its origins in state building, then its presentation as something uncontrollable has a critical element as well. Kaniuk’s representation of the Palmach generation is complex in its affirmation of solidarity and bravery but in the last instance it makes the viewer face uncomfortable facts regarding the national use of violence.

DOLLY CITY, CRITIQUE, AND PARODY
OF NATIONAL PARENTING

The narratives dealt with up until this point treat national identity as a given, an end product which can then be therapeutically transformed or parodied. Both therapeutic narratives as well as Kaniuk’s novel do not aim to transform national identity at the site where national identity is constructed. Walk on Water, for instance, offers the most prosaic narrative of Eyal’s identity as the combined result of the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Amos Oz provides a more in depth description of his socialization as a national subject, the way in which he was interpellated as a good, smart, Jewish boy whenever he said something political. He tells of the way his father told him with tears in his eyes that Jews will not have to be beat up anymore during the long night of the declaration of independence. However, these descriptions are not critical, and do not aim to be transformed. There is a sense that the author is rather pleased with the results of his socialization: his displaced parents projected an empowered, essentially fictional, Zionist identity on him that he then took up and that has, in many ways, served him well. His “line of flight” from his father was also set by the father himself; in order to fulfill the Zionist ideal, he had to leave the right wing version of Zionism he grew up on and move to the Kibbutz where he attempted to join mainstream labor Zionism. Thus, Oz’s more detailed description of socialization is not done in the name of transformation but in order to understand and empathize. A very different picture emerges when we move from therapeutic narratives that involve the Oedipal son and father conflict to narratives that concentrate on the mother.

While the Zionist father interpolates politically, giving the illusion of political agency, sometimes paradoxically by being critical of the state, it is mothers and teachers who “speak the state directly.” It is their business to educate, form, and construct the national subject. They regulate discourse minutely and have the tasking job of constructing the national subject on a day-by-day basis. Historically it was their task to quickly create a common language (from the babel of linguistic diversity that came with immigration); they speak the dominant official language as it relates to the socialization of the national subjects and they have the job of monitoring deviant uses. It is the teachers who are supposed to create the Hebrew-
speaking man out of a multiplicity of languages and origins. There is an element of ventriloquism in the tone and language of the socializing agent that creates a distinct feeling of someone talking in a discourse that comes from beyond real social circumstances. It is against this normalizing background of the mother as a socializing agent that we must analyze Orly Castle-Bloom’s novel *Dolly City*.

First published in 1993, it is a story of an extremely abusive mother named Dolly. Told in the first person and set in a future dystopian Israel, the novel concentrates on Dolly’s violent anxiety regarding the health of her adopted son. She worries that he might be suffering from various medical conditions ranging from cancer to missing an internal organ. In response to her worries she repeatedly and needlessly operates on him. She cuts him open and holds a “role call” of his organs checking and rechecking that they are all there. Dolly is obviously both psychotic and paranoid and the reader might come to think that this is a purely personal madness, but both Jewish and Israeli motives in her madness continually make an appearance. Through the novel, we come to realize that Dolly is a sinister parody of the Israeli mother and the way this figure “socializes”; Dolly’s incessant worry can be seen as an exaggerated manifestation of the Yiddishe Mame overprotection, an overprotection which translates into a manipulative intrusiveness, an almost total domination over the life that is in her care. But this is not only a controlling Yiddishe Mame, she is also a very psychotic, nationalist, right-wing, Israeli mother. At one point in the story she goes to Germany where, as in *Walk on Water*, she meets the “new” German, this time a saintly woman who takes care of orphans. She uses the woman in order to extract the kidneys out of the children who are there. This episode signals the exact opposite of the progression that *Walk on Water* takes. Rather than normalization or even self-transformation with the German other, we get a fantasy of revenge. Above all, however, the parody of the mother as a coercive socializing agent reveals itself in the homage to Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* where Dolly etches the map of Israel on her son’s back.

I took a knife and began cutting here and there. I drew a map of the Land of Israel during the Biblical period on his back, just as I remember it from school, and marked in all those Philistine towns like Gath and Ashkelon, and with the blade of the knife I etched the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River, which empties out into the Dead Sea that goes on evaporating nonstop.

Drops of blood began welling up in the river beds cutting across the country. The sight of the map of the Land of Israel, amateurishly sketched on my son’s back, gave me a shiver of delight. At long last I felt that I was cutting into living flesh. My baby screamed in pain—but I stood firm. (31)

The passage parodies and makes explicit both in terms of the image and the way in which it is related, the arbitrary and violent nature of socialization. This violence
and arbitrariness reveal themselves both in what she does and the way in which these actions are given to us in the paragraph. Sentences that start casually are often derailed and finish arbitrarily, such as the second long winding sentence that finishes abruptly and therefore arbitrarily with the “Dead Sea goes on evaporating non-stop.” The language of the passage joins the image of drawing a map, forming a figure, an identity on her son’s back.

Her son is ultimately taken to a children’s home under the ministrations of Dolly’s kindly sister. Dolly, however, meets up with him six years later. Her son is surprisingly a vibrant flourishing thirteen year old, energetically swimming in a pool. She can hardly recognize him and so she wants to make sure. She asks him to show her his back.

“Get out of the Water, that’s an order!” I shouted [. . .] “Turn around,” I said. He obeyed, and I saw the map of the Land of Israel on his back. The map was amazingly accurate and up-to-date; someone had gone over all the lines and expanded them as the child had grown. I examined the map carefully, and one thing stood out: He had returned the ’67 borders! Beyond belief! Yes, that’s the generation gap for you, I reflected. My mother spits on Arabs, I look them straight in the eye, and one day my son will lick their assholes. (114)

*Dolly City*, written around the time of the Oslo accords, exhibits an optimism regarding the cessation of the Arab-Israeli hostilities and a real expectation that Israel would withdraw to the ’67 line, with a two-state solution and mutual recognition resulting in the process. The novel is a critique of the violent, over-controlling mother who literally, painfully writes, etches, an identity of a greater Israel on her son’s back—a critique whose seeming inconsistency is possible at a time of real optimism regarding the peace process. Only a time of change and basic hopefulness enables a critique and parody of the way in which the national subject is socialized. Castle-Bloom pokes fun at the way in which national identity is created and reproduced; she represents this socialization as a violent imposition. At the same time, however, national socialization and national identity create an in-group and an out-group. As the image of the map entails, socializing toward an identity is always an active process of creating borders that form a hierarchical regime of inclusion and exclusion. While unavoidably imposing itself on the subject it also “raises” this subject to a position that is seen as above that of other subjects, in the same way in which foreground is more “elevated” than background. It is this aspect of national practices of exclusion and “back grounding” which forms the main thrust of our next author, Sayed Kashua.
Sayed Kashua was born in 1975 in Tira, an Arab village that lies about a quarter of an hour’s drive west of Jerusalem inside the ’67 line. As a young boy, he was sent by his father to a prestigious, Jewish-Israeli boarding school in Jerusalem. Thus, he was socialized as a Jewish-Israeli and integrated into Jewish-Israeli society. Kashua writes in Hebrew. His works include three novels, *Dancing Arabs*, *Let it be Morning*, and more recently *Second Person*. He is also known for his satiric columns for *Haaretz* newspaper, where he addresses in a humorous, ironic, tongue-in-cheek style the problems faced by the Arab minority in Israel, that is, those Palestinians who live inside the ’67 border and possess an Israeli citizenship. Kashua has also scripted a television series now in its third season. Most of his work is loosely autobiographical; taken together his corpus can be quite usefully compared to Oz’s massive *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. I would like to concentrate here on the television series since it has had the most effect on public discourse in Israel.

*Avoda Aravit*, or *Arab Labor*, is a satiric sitcom written by Kashua that is broadcast on prime-time Israeli television. It is the first Israeli television series devoted to the ordinary life of the Arab-Israeli minority in Israel. Amjad, Bushra, and their two young children live in an Arab village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Bushra is a social worker, pragmatic in terms of economic integration in Israeli society but holds firmly to her Arab identity. Amjad, loosely based on Kashua himself, is a journalist working for a liberal, Israeli newspaper, much like *Haaretz* that Kashua works for. Amjad desperately seeks to assimilate into the Jewish-Israeli elite with mixed and often comical results. He might for instance ask his colleagues at the newspaper which car he should buy so as to appear Israeli and not get stopped at road blocks, or how to pronounce certain letters in Hebrew with an Israeli accent. The way in which culture excludes is revealed in small incidents in an otherwise integrated lifestyle. In one episode, Amjad and his family are invited to celebrate Passover by a mother from the mixed Arab-Jewish kindergarten his daughter goes to. Amjad considers this the pinnacle of his attempts at assimilation and social integration into what he considers Ashkenazi high society. Because Passover is the national ritual par excellence, where the nation is narrated and indeed imagined together, it makes for a dramatic and fitting occasion for the show to critically examine the regime of inclusion and exclusion which socialization entails. In the Passover scene Amjad does his utmost to be the ideal participant in the Seder, he puts on a yarmulke and reads in the traditional liturgical intonation. Like the wise son of the Seder, he asks all the right questions: why do we eat hard boiled eggs; or what is the Charoset to which he is offered either totally arbitrary answers or
paternal ones, like the Charoset is supposed to represent mortar since the Israelites worked in construction (e.g., like today’s Arab Israelis).

For the viewers, the Passover Seder changes its meaning completely in the presence of an excluded minority. Some of the statements of the Passover meal which, in a diaspora context, are interpreted as fantasies of revenge of a prosecuted minority like “Pour you wrath on the Goyim,” etc. become sinister when enunciated by a majority in the presence of its own minority. The very presence of Amjad and his family at the Passover meal signals the need to re-interpret, to refigure Jewish Israeli identity in a new way, as if to say culture has to be revised when it turns from a minority culture into essentially a state culture.

However, far from solely expressing critique, Sayed points to those aspects of the Jewish tradition that provide an exceptional resource for dealing with the new political situation. Kashua’s writing is in fact very familiar to Hebrew readers; his heroes are very similar to the protagonists of Jewish literature from the turn of the century, a literature filled with comic-tragic Jews who wanted to be Gentile. In some of its classical manifestations, Zionist culture is built on the failure to assimilate so there is something ironic about trying to assimilate to it, in turn. In contrast to cultures that flaunt their supposed universality, Zionist culture is based on a bitter experience of a failed assimilation. In trying to assimilate and to mimic this culture, one is constantly being reminded of one’s own minority status. Assimilating to Israeli Jewish culture is an attempt to adopt a culture of a minority by a minority. Instead of assimilation being a metaphor of losing particularism and being swallowed, homogenized by the greater whole, one is necessarily bounced back to one’s original identity, the identity which one tried to get rid of. A complex web of references and ironies manifests itself in the show. After coming home from Passover and while getting ready to go to bed Amjad tells his wife:

Amjad: From now on, no more blood, no sheep, no grill. From now on, new rules. For your information that’s why they always win.
Bushra: What’s that got to do with it?
Amjad: I’ll tell you. These things start with little things. No, big things. On holidays they all sit together, sing the same songs, recite the same prayers read the same stories. If we ever want to be human beings we should learn from them. Can’t we sit quietly together? Just family, without blood, or grill, no smell of roasting and dirt? (Season 1 episode 5)

In this scene and in strict congruence with all minor literature, politics is inserted painfully into everyday life. Amjad projects material and military power relations unto culture. He idealizes Passover as exhibiting a spiritualized and textual unity that he sees as the basis for Jewish success in getting hold of Palestine. In his idealization we can read self-critique and Arab self-hatred which results when-
ever a dominated culture or class exists under a dominating socialization system.11 Arab self-hatred, of course, harks back to Jewish self-hatred, which in turns points to the tragic dynamic of overcoming self-hatred by becoming a major culture that then creates self-hatred in others. Amjad’s foolish valorization of unity and disembodied-ness is ironic in several respects since it, too, is a direct and exceedingly rich allusion to Jewish existence as a minor culture and especially to its relationship with Christianity, which conceived of itself as more united and more spiritual. Paul’s founding statements on unity and spirituality that “sublate” Judaism are very instructive here. On unity Paul says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), and regarding disembodied spirituality, “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (Romans 2:28–29). These sentiments reverberate through the centuries and have set the way in which Christianity as a major culture perceived Judaism. Kashua makes use of this background in order to make a complex statement on minority culture which is bound to project unity and spirituality unto the major culture even if that same major culture is “known” for its values of embodiment and multiplicity. Amjad’s foolishness makes us negate what he affirms, but this does not make us negate Judaism, but only a Judaism that becomes a tool of the state.

Ultimately this critique is not about religion or culture but about power. It is about the way in which a dominating culture has the ability to present itself as more persuasive, natural, unified, strong, and spiritual in the face of a fractured minority culture wholly unsure of itself. In a sense Kashua makes his viewers rearticulate and split contemporary Jewish culture into two; a major state culture and a minor diaspora culture. In fact, he presents for us in the Pesach scene a Diaspora Judaism which has taken the inappropriate garb of the power of state culture. Implicitly he calls for the diasporaization of Jewish culture, essentially its deterritorialization and globalization.12

In another sophisticated episode Kashua directs his critique not at the relationship between power and culture per se but toward actual co-existence, the living together of Arabs and Jews. In the first episode of the third season Amjad decides he wants to participate in the Israeli version of Big Brother, in order to demonstrate that Arabs and Jews can live together, co-exist in the same house.

**BIG BROTHER AND ITS NEW POLITICAL USES**

Big Brother of course forms an exceptional political metaphor, not in the original totalitarian sense which Orwell intended it, but in a way which is related to the
television show’s main dramatic motor: the periodic evictions of certain members from the house, a process which resonates strongly both with the Jewish national story—being evicted from Europe, being under the threat of being evicted “to the sea” in their new homeland—and of course with the Palestinian national story, which is essentially a story of evictions, that is the evictions of ’48 and ’67, and the threat of transfer.

Before Amjad, our hero, meets the other housemates, he is asked by Big Brother to conceal his identity as an Arab, and impersonate a Jewish-Israeli, to which he is at first taken aback but then enthusiastically responds, perfectly mimicking the classical core of a past Israeli identity, in fact acting as the son of Palmach members which Kaniuk satirized. At the end of the series he is of course, comically evicted. Such is the basic plot of Arab Labor: Amjad enthusiastically tries to assimilate, to mimic, to belong to the “house” usually by adopting some aspect of high Jewish-Israeli culture, either past or present, with results that reveal the fault lines in Israeli society in its complex mix of acceptance and exclusion of the Arab-Israeli. The dynamic of mimicry, of acceptance and rejection, of reversals of success and failure at belonging are effective both as comedy and as political intervention. Amjad gestures to the powers that construct him as one of “us,” and not one of “us” at the same time. As Homi Bhabha comments:

... mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (122)

Arab Labor indeed comments on the societal forces that would like the Arab-Israeli to be completely like the Jewish-Israeli but that at the same time insist on Arab difference.

The themes of mimicry, assimilation, inclusion, and exclusion based on race and identity are both familiar and sensitive subjects in the Jewish national narrative; the attempt to assimilate in Europe and its violent end is always in mind while watching the series. Indeed many have commented that Sayed Kashua is the most classically Jewish-Zionist author writing in Israel, comparing him with Theodore Herzl, the founder of political Zionism. Herzl wrote theater drama, for instance “Das Neue Ghetto” (The New Ghetto), that utilizes some of the same ploys as Arab labor: the attempted mimicry of the Jews to their gentile surrounding, pride in assimilation, rejection of society, shame and nationalist reactions to shame. Kashua appeals to Jewish and Zionist tradition in order to critique the exclusion of today. In biblical terms one can say that Arab Labor episodes remind the audience “Thou
shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (King James Bible, Exodus 22:21).

REFIGURING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN GLOBALIZING WORLD

To conclude let us step back and look at the effects of all of these transformation narratives together. These and other novels and films engage in a sustained re-using of the past and successfully transform the way people articulate their identity. They do this with an empathic retelling of the national story like Oz, with the German or Arab Israeli other as in the film Walk on Water and Arab Labor, or with a crazed narrator like Kaniuk’s and Castel-Bloom’s. Therapeutic interventions end with a working through of displacement and immigration, a heightened awareness of the effects of the Holocaust, and a new appreciation of the creative potential of Jewish identity and culture. Self-critical satire breaks open a monolithic national identity, exposing its constructed nature and calls for creative transformations. We can now ask why these two narratives are so central to the way literature and film re-imagine national identity in contemporary times. I think that the answer lies most prominently in globalization. International flows of culture, goods, and people help strengthen civil society in its critique and parody of state violence and state agents. Somewhat paradoxically, globalization also leads to a demand for specifically national narratives in the international market. In a recent talk, Salman Rushdie pointed out that contemporary writers are increasingly asked to mediate the story of a nation for an international audience. Indeed that is what his own Midnight’s Children did for India, what J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace did for South Africa, Toni Morrison’s novels for the U.S., and Oz and Grossman for Israel. Thus we get narratives that are called to represent the nation on an international market but heal, critique, or poke fun at it at the same time. The system in which Hebrew literature finds itself has radically changed. Previously this system or field was constructed as a national field; now the field is constituted as semi-global. Some actors achieve international success while others remain domestic. Some mediate and explain the national story on the global stage while others parody the nation in order to change it.

Israeli national-cultural discourse is not a sole expression of some underlying economic forces that determine its content. However, its expression is a result of creative adaptation to economical and political pressures and opportunities that have become more and more global. Mainstream literature and culture has responded by articulating narratives that simultaneously reflect feelings of lack of political agency and an empathic apologetic self-representation for the global other. Minor literature in Israel saw an opportunity in the weakening of the state
to articulate a critique in the form of parody that attempts to reconfigure national identity.

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NOTES

1 For a cultural take on the post-national condition, see Arjun Appadurai, 139–201. For a more economic approach, see David Held. For an overview of recent changes since the 1980s see Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy. For the Israeli case, see Uri Ram.

2 For a similar analysis of this phenomena for another global writer, see Reiichi Miura.

3 Most recently Oz has coauthored a book with his daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger titled *Jews and Words* whose main thrust is to conceive of Jewish identity neither in religious terms nor in territorial terms but as a culture dependent on an essentially diasporic secular culture and pedagogy. See Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger.

4 For a literary representation of the first option, the “failed” socialization of the second generation see David Grossman. For Masculine Zionist generation, see Michael Gluzman.

5 For the original relief theory of humor, see Herbert Spencer.


8 For ventriloquist aspects of the voice, see Slavoj Žižek. The ventriloquist aspects of official language are the staple of Israeli comedy especially when parodying school teachers, military personal and politicians. An excellent example of such comedy at the height of the post-Zionist era was the *Chamber Quintet* (*Ha-Hamishia Hakamerit*) a weekly Israeli satirical sketch comedy television program created by Asaf Tzipor and Eitan Tzur which aired between 1993–1997.

9 *Dolly City* was first published in Hebrew by Zemora Bitan in 1992.

10 Again I am using Deleuze’s concept of minor literature which fulfills the thoroughly political nature of a “minor literature”; “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating in it.” See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 17.

11 For the Jewish analogy, see Sander Gilman.

12 For a theoretical take on the same call from a Jewish Perspective See Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin.

13 For a typical example of Sayed as Herzl see Modi Bar On’s Television Owls in which he interviews Sayed Kashua https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB5zX-64goc.

WORKS CITED


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