Etgar Keret's Travelling Heroes

by

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I have chosen to talk about Etgar Keret’s fiction, which I am investigating as part of my doctoral research of the shifts in Israeli travel writing. I will start by telling those of you who are unfamiliar with Keret, something about him.

Etgar Keret, a 30-something year-old Tel-Avivian, is a best-selling contemporary Israeli writer. Together with other postmodern writers he is an immensely popular subject for literary criticism and debate. His short stories offer us surreal pseudo-plots that sometimes read like film briefs, and have in fact inspired numerous short films. Over the past decade Keret’s stories have been translated and published worldwide; he has also collaborated with illustrators on a number of English-language graphic novels; recently Keret and London-based Palestinian writer Samir El-Youssef collaborated on the collection Gaza Blues which won both writers global acclaim. Although Keret was described as anti-Semitic by a conservative speaker in the Israeli parliament, his works are featured in the Israeli high-school curriculum. Most popular among young readers and Israeli soldiers, Keret captures the Kafkaesque nature of the Israeli zeitgeist: its unavoidable senselessness, disorientation, and surreal distortions. His snapshots convey the current urban fusion of Israel, encapsulated so well in the city of Tel Aviv; author Yoram Kaniuk wrote that this entity "is supposedly light, but not. It has no state. It has no mother and father. It is its own family."

Keret has declared that he aims for compact stories that articulate complex ideas in the simplest way. One persistent character in his fiction is the roaming Israeli: his recurrent narrator is forever travelling abroad, meandering through airports, chancing upon unexpected prophets in the slum capitals of the world, and even

1 This paper was presented at the 14th Annual Conference of The Australian Association for Jewish Studies, at the Centre for Jewish History and Culture, School of Languages and Linguistics, The University of Melbourne, February 2006

2 Yoram Kaniuk, "Like happy apathy that is angry deep in the roots, but is not preachy, Kneller’s Summer Camp/Etgar Keret", Haaretz, Books, December 16, 1998, p.6
meeting costumed secret agents on aeroplanes. But however unreal the escapades, the human trauma that underlies them is palpable, and his lonely characters are physically displaced and spiritually uprooted, searching for their identity.

Keret’s first collection, *Pipelines* (1992), met with meteoric success. This title evoked the image of an “anatomy of escape routes,” getaways from the national burdens of Israel. "Patrol" (*Masa*) describes the new fad or commodity in Israel: ‘getting lost’, finding a place no one has ever visited, satisfying the need for newness of experience in a culture numbed by an over-abundance of clichés.

Having completed his military service, the young man pursuing this commodity travels far away to some forest in the tropics, in search of virgin space. In the depths of the jungle he reaches a clearing, believing this was it, this was his longed-for virgin space. But he is surprised to see Hebrew etched into the tree trunk – “Nir Dekel, August Five, Golani Reconnaissance Patrol.” There is no escape from the national framework. As the traveller relates this story to his silent guide, hired specifically to help him get lost, the guide indeed finds virgin space, but it ends up being right in Tel Aviv, in a cleared lot on the edge of the city; “maybe they’re all in Thailand…”, the guide mutters.

Keret reinforces, in “Patrol”, the notion that Israel has been over-mapped; it has been over-articulated by political, literary, religious, and ideological forces. And not only does it necessitate escape, but escape is found within, in the spaces left abandoned by political, literary, religious and ideological rhetoric.

Keret’s 2002 story “A Visit to the Cockpit,” from *The Nimrod Flip-Out* is one of the few narrated by a woman. It describes her first ever trip overseas: she is flying to New York after her release from military service. Despite her age, she flies with her father. Once in the city, she meets with her boyfriend Giora, and he rushes her from the Statue of Liberty to the MOMA, and past other attractions in which she has no interest. She would rather be alone with him, and have sex, but she suspects he is avoiding intimacy. Later he reveals that her suspicions were justified: he has another lover. In contrast with our narrator, the other woman is a seasoned traveller, a Lufthansa air-hostess no less. She is a woman of the world, a free agent, unlike the main character who is

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babied by her father, and guided through New York by her boyfriend. On the flight back she cries in the plane. With her outbreak of tears, her father, somewhat patronising, takes her to the cockpit where she is laughed at for her age. As they leave the city that has everything, according to the pilot, she is reminded of her final week of military training, eagerly waiting for the moment of release.

Before continuing, a note about women in Keret’s work. While he is considered an anti-macho public figure, his fictional women are usually secondary to the main character, and are often subordinate to male sexual expectations: mostly they are schoolgirls or young women incorporated into the story for their sex. In this story, while the main protagonist is a woman, she is still subordinated to her boyfriend, her father, and the pilot, and her child-like relationship to these men is conveyed as one aspect of her entrapment. This is not to say that Keret is a chauvinist, but that his stories convey the definite chauvinism that exists in Israeli society, as in much Israeli literature.

<slide 7: Jetlag> The Picaresque story "Jetlag", written in 1998, relates a hallucination upon an aeroplane. On the way back from New York, the storyteller relates that the air hostess fell in love with him; she lavished extra tomato juice and bread rolls upon him, and eyed him during the pre-flight demonstration. The little girl beside him confirms his suspicions, saying “she’s crazy for you…” and when her mother goes to the toilet, the girl continues – ‘go for it… give it to her now, and give her one for me.’ The girl’s vulgarity surprises and embarrasses the storyteller, so he changes the subject, only to learn that the girl is in fact a costumed midget smuggling heroin rectally. The mother returns from the toilet, and soon bursts in tears, bemoaning her daughter’s rebellious behaviour following her father’s death. The storyteller retreats to the back of the plane, and the air hostess grabs him and declares that the plane is about to crash. She says to our narrator – her beloved: “I have to save you… we’re about to crash the plane on purpose… following instructions from the top. Once every year or two we crash a plane at sea, and kill a child or two, so that people take flight safety more seriously, you know, pay attention to the demonstration and emergency procedure.” She shoves a parachute in his hand, opens the hatch, and he is sucked out into the sky. Later, at the Holiday Inn, he sees the rescue operation on television and wishes he could be there, nestled among the survivors, sharing their bond.

Like many of Keret’s stories, "Jetlag" begins with a deceptively romantic scenario promising a union between the narrator and the object of his desire. However, as
Adia Mendelson-Maoz noted, Keret then deploys his favourite narrative twist: the tryst relapses into a fatal situation, and romantic love becomes murderous love.\(^6\)

I mentioned that this story is picaresque: this storyteller is like the classic Picaro, interacting with various levels of society, becoming attached and yet always remaining aloof, free to satisfy his own interests. But this modern permutation on the Picaro is not actually travelling, but merely commuting from hotel to hotel. His adventures occur not in New York – his destination - but in the inconsequential airbus, in between the in-flight entertainment. A modern middle-class nomad, his adventures convey his consistently threatened position, and the persistent feeling of his non-belonging, both geographically and socially. The drive to dedicate his life to the group and its country - the collective imperative - is undone in Keret’s fiction.

Samir El-Youssef, with whom Keret recently collaborated, wrote that many Palestinian and Israeli writers - Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, Amos Oz, David Grossman, A. B. Yehoshua – all portray a collective identity.\(^7\) Keret and El-Youssef however, both fulfil the reader’s yearning for the ‘private, regardless of public discourse’ in their highly politicised societies.

Deliberately un-epic, Keret’s Israeli travellers connect with the homeless junkies, the delusional Vietnam veterans, the street dwellers and the like. This is the case in the story “One good deed a day,” initially published in the collection Anihu in 2002. This story opens with a list of people two Israeli travellers helped in the States: a bleeding black man in San-Diego, a fat homeless lady in Oregon, a crying kid in Vegas, a cat with an eye infection in Atlanta - all in order to encourage good karma essential for a coast-to-coast trip.

The story ends:

I went over to the AM-PM store across from the motel to get us some coffee. When I came out of the store, I saw a huge full moon above me. But really huge. I’d never seen such a moon before. ‘Big, huh?’ said a skinny guy with red eyes and pimples who was sitting on the steps of the store. He was wearing a short T-shirt with a picture of Madonna on it, and his arms were lined with needle tracks. ‘Huge,’ I said, ‘I never saw a moon like that.’ ‘Biggest in the world,’ the skinny guy said and tried to get up. ‘You wanna buy it? For you, twenty

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bucks. ’Ten,’ I said, and handed him the bill. ’You know what’ the skinny guy’s smile showed a mouth of rotten teeth. ’Make it ten; you look like a nice guy.’

This is the karma earned by the travellers’ good deeds.

This scene evokes Tel Aviv so strongly, with the AM-PM store, the street life, the 24-hour city, and the absence of social barriers. Perhaps the trip inadvertently brought the Israeli traveller back to the Israeli entity, as in the earlier story, ”Patrol.”

Keret once said that the Middle East is ”a factory for heroism and we are supposed to consume it.” His anti-heroes are unique in a society driven by the heroic ethos. Such an anti-hero is a black man sitting on the footpath in Manhattan, selling hundreds of copies of a book titled How to Make a Good Script Great (also the title of the story) <slide 8: illust.>. The narrator believes this to be a tip from god, encouraging him to become a script writer. His girlfriend tells him not to buy anything from the homeless man, because the books are probably stolen, or fake, or filled with worms, but he hands over a $100 note and trusts that the man not to run away with the change. The man crosses the road to get the change, but upon his return he is run over by a truck. The narrator eventually returns to Israel and becomes a script writer. The homeless man was a martyr for the author’s private cause.

Keret’s characters are aimless nomads whose lives are devoid of any greater meaning. His travelling narrators therefore share a basic sense of dislocation with the homeless, the addicts, and the insane.

Keret likens his own experience of feeling out of place to being ’a Jew in the Diaspora of Israel.’ In the opening of the story ”Halibut” <slide 9: anihu> he writes ”Ever since I came back to Israel, everything looks different to me. Smelly, sad, dull. Even those lunches with Ari that used to light up my day are a drag now.” Over one such lunch at a seaside restaurant, Ari orders Halibut, and the narrator orders the daily special: talking fish.

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9 Greene, ’Gaza Blues’: Israeli, Palestinian Combine Skewered Tales in New Volume ([cited]).
10 Keret, Cheap Moon (Anihu).
12 Keret, The Nimrod Flip-Out 111.
Much to his dissatisfaction, “the talking fish – [keeps] quiet.” He becomes increasingly irate, and ends up fighting with his friend. After the latter leaves, Keret writes: “I looked at the sea through the glass – a little murky but very powerful. I looked at the fish – lying on its stomach with its eyes closed, its body rising and falling as if it were breathing.” He lights a cigarette and gazes out to sea. The following quote epitomises Keret’s national schizophrenia:

_I could sit like this looking at the sea for hours._ 
<click> ‘Take off,’ the fish whispered to me... ‘grab a cab to the airport and hop on the first plane out.’ ‘But I can’t just take off like that,’ I explained in a clear, slow voice, ‘I have commitments here, business.’ The fish shut up again and so did I. Almost a minute later, it added, ‘Never mind, forget it. I’m depressed.’

Keret and MMS: a comparative note

Keret admits to being influenced by earlier masters of the short story such as Franz Kafka, S. Y. Agnon, and Nikolai Gogol. There is outstanding similarity between Keret’s literary position and that of 19th century Yiddish writer Shalom Yaakov Abramovich, better known by his pseudonym – Mendele The Book Peddler <slide 10: MMS>.

Both Mendele and Keret are known for grotesque characters, aimless and naive travellers, which have inadvertently become symbols of a national state of being. Mendele’s renowned novel, _The Travels of Benjamin the Third_, is a Jewish adaptation of Don Quixote, depicting the travels of two small-town Jewish fools through Europe on their way to Israel: an exotic destination they read about. The novella parodies medieval Jewish travelogues, Hassidic pilgrimage tales, and even Zionist propaganda, by depicting the squalor and destitution permeating Jewish society in 19th century Eastern Europe. Keret’s ‘national schizophrenia’ resembles the bipolar world of Mendele’s protagonist, who, like Don Quixote, chases phantom destinations in order to escape the poverty, dispossession, and isolation in his world.

<slide 11: MMS#2> Linguistically, both Keret and Mendele were hailed as marking a new phase in Hebrew literature, ushering modernity. Furthermore, both authors have legitimised the literary use of the spoken vernaculars of their time.

The works of both authors share a tragi-comic quality. Mendele once remarked, “I laugh with one eye and cry with the other.” Critic Gershon Shaked noted that the
texture of Mendele’s fiction is made up of contradictory layers, a chain of comic incongruities that lead to parody.

Writer and critic Gadi Taub has said the following of Keret, but it may also apply to Mendele, and many of his followers:

“Behind the most archetypal and most banal trappings of Israeliness [or Jewishness, in the case of Mendele], Keret finds something like a gypsy circus, which is simultaneously happy and sad, wild and full of life.”

While Keret’s prose is radically different to that of Mendele, it is undoubtedly part of the literary tradition of the dislocated author.

Conclusion

Keret has been described by Israeli critic Nissim Calderon as the Amos Oz of his generation. However, unlike the fiction of kibbutz and war veteran Oz, Keret’s fiction is not subservient to the national dilemma. These short stories are not overtly measured by the standard of being a Jew or an Israeli engaged in a struggle. Not engaging the political debate directly, if at all, is Keret’s rebellion. Keret, unlike Oz, pushes the fragmented into the forefront of his fiction, resisting the urge to unite society through the creation of mythological or heroic characters. As one reporter noted, Keret’s “placement of the mundane under the microscope renders his social commentary ingenious and unique.”

By no means has this been an exhaustive analysis of Keret’s fiction. We have, however, come to appreciate Keret’s deployment of certain narrative techniques, plot structures, and characterisation, to narrate his private sense of dislocation – which speaks to so many.

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Bibliography

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