Israeli Military Fiction:

A Narrative in Transformation

Keren Tova Rubinstein, BA Hons (History and Hebrew Studies)

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Department for Jewish Studies and Culture

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**Synopsis**

The current study investigates changing attitudes to militarism within Israeli fiction and society during the tumultuous decades following the Six-Day War. Events leading to the current state of Israeli society will be traced in order to illustrate the way in which change occurs. The shifts in Israeli history and society during these decades will be examined alongside developments in Israeli literature over this time. Therefore, eight works of fiction have been selected to lie at the heart of the study. These fictional texts, all of which centre around the Israeli military experience, convey an erosion of personal, national, and ideological certainties. The analysis of these works demands three areas of exploration: the depiction of the soldier as he interacts with others in the civilian setting, the depiction of the soldier as he interacts with other soldiers in the military sphere, and ‘post-Zionist’ military fiction produced in recent decades. These three areas of exploration entail an interrogation of gender, nationalism, and ‘post-Zionism’ in contemporary Israel. The works examined in the third chapter contain commentary not only upon the social reality of their authors, but also upon the way in which Israeli literature engages with the issues that inform its existence.

The study is fuelled by the need to understand the links between history and fiction. The fiction is seen as an attempt to grapple with the strain of the ongoing conflict in Israel. Some authors have explored this through a re-narration of past chapters in Israeli history, while others comment on the events of their time. Some authors have identified this strain as a diminishing masculinity; others convey this burden as a direct corollary of shifting truths about Israeli nationalism.
Declaration of Authenticity

This thesis comprises only my original work except where indicated otherwise. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is 30,000 words in length, inclusive of footnotes but exclusive of the bibliography.

Signed by Keren Tova Rubinstein: ____________________________
Acknowledgements

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The Military in History, Society and Literature in
Israel:
An Introduction

With each war, Israeli society has moved farther and farther away from the
faith that mobilised one hundred thousand individuals to fight in the War of
Independence in 1948. As Israel’s tenuous grip on territory was subsequently, so
too were challenged the tenuous connections between the individuals and the
ongoing struggle challenged. Israeli military fiction is a window onto the ever-
changing society of the country. The product of the meeting between the military
and fictional realms can only be understood as part of the broader framework of
history, society and literature. These three fields of knowledge consequently
support the current study. Each chapter discusses Israeli military fiction
according to these themes. The works will be located within a historical, social,
and literary context in order to draw the links between the very real military
experience, and the more fluid collective imagination.

Inevitably, this approach produces a number of questions. What is the
significance of the martial experience in Israeli collective consciousness? What
has the military come to represent in Israeli literature? How does the connection
between citizenship and military experience translate into fiction? Where does
fiction dealing with the Israeli military experience emerge as an openly critical
body of work within Israeli fiction? How does it connect with other critical works
of Israeli fiction? An awareness of these questions underpins the current study,
which is an attempt to grapple with the powerful presence of militarism in Israeli
imagination.

An examination of military fiction necessitates two levels of exploration. The
first is a deconstruction of masculinity, informed by gender studies. The second
level of exploration addresses challenges to nationalism, concentrating the
experience of individuals as subjects of the state. Both levels of analysis, when
applied to stories written after 1948 about soldiers, expose the shedding of old
presumptions and the questioning of the ideology and culture that dominate life
in Israel. The changing fields of masculinity and nationalism mark a collective transition in Israel.

As with other themes in Israeli literature, the representation of the army has undergone several transformations that correspond to historical events. Palmach literature, written between the 1930s and 1950s, told the story of the struggle to gain independence, and focused on the glory contained in social and national involvement. There is a progression from a state-fostering attitude in Palmach military fiction, towards a more critical stance in ‘New Wave’ and ‘Different Wave’ literature. These critical writings can be loosely perceived as modernist and postmodernist fictions, although as will emerge in the following analyses, these are problematic terms. The military experience in Israeli identity has continued to be a vessel through which the affictions of Israeli life can be communicated, although ‘New Wave’ fiction has stripped it of its former glory. The military experience now represents a gradual erosion of the binding forces within Israeli society.

Fiction written between the 1960s and the early 1980s figured the army as a locus for the woeful erosion of Zionism. In many of the novels written since that time, the soldier embodies a ‘post-Zionist’ condition, and is an expression of the loss of meaning of assumed axiomatic truths about Israeli life. The military is but one of the cultural symbols whose currency has changed. Generations born after the establishment of the state have ceased to accept the ‘New Jew’ - the fighting hero - as an acceptable model for their identity, and this has been expressed in the works examined in this study. Although fiction that places military experience as its central subject has dwindled since the Palmach years, Israeli literature’s focus has tightened and it has nonetheless become a critical body of literature. In other words, Israeli military fiction has diminished in quantity, but has become more provocative.
1960-2003: Social, Historical and Academic Changes

This study begins with the ‘New Wave’ shift in Israeli literature, which occurred after the 1950s.\(^1\) The ‘New Wave’ in Hebrew fiction was initiated by the ‘Generation of the State’, termed as such by Gabriel Moked.\(^2\) The Holocaust and the War of Independence were no longer formative experiences for the members of this generation. The 1956 Sinai Campaign was one prominent experience for this generation. Perceived as a war of choice, the Sinai Campaign featured Israeli soldiers’ first confrontation with Palestinian refugees, in the Gaza Strip. Israel cooperated with England and France in this campaign, an alliance that prompted questions about the colonial aspects of Israel’s military activity.

The trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 was a further significant event during this time. Vis-à-vis the retelling of Holocaust survivors’ experiences during the war, the trial exposed its hitherto suppressed horrors, and forced the questioning of the negation of the Diaspora experience in Zionist rhetoric. The Six-Day War of 1967 was followed by a combination of triumphant euphoria and growing guilt about the Palestinians, now under Israeli occupation. In the words of Gershon Shaked, “the military victory is...a kind of moral victory of the defeated against the victorious.”\(^3\) These events deepened the gap between the Left and Right in Israel and contributed to other growing divisions within Israeli society.

One of the most cataclysmic events in Israeli history was the political upheaval of the late 1970s. In the elections of 1977, the Labour party was voted out of office and the dominance of Labour Zionism was significantly weakened. The ‘revolution’ that occurred in the Israeli political and cultural establishment around this time heralded a more pluralistic era in art, the social sciences, and political debate. Baruch Kimmerling writes that after 1977 “most of the intellectuals and academics felt themselves to be ‘under foreign occupation.’”\(^4\)

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\(^{1}\) Literary critics and historians have debated the time of the shift. Gershon Shaked states that it was as early as the 1950s that the shift from social realism occurred (see Gershon Shaked, Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880-1980, vol. 5 (Israel: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998). Hanan Hever locates this shift in the 1960s; see Hanan Hever, Literature Written from Here (Tel Aviv: Miskal - Yediot Ahronot Books and Che med Books, 1999).

\(^{2}\) Hever, Literature Written from Here 46.

\(^{3}\) Shaked, Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880-1980 27.

Kimmerling proceeds to say that "the change of regime triggered more critical and fresh thinking, including [academia’s] recognition of the very existence of the Palestinian people and their right for another kind of self-determination."\(^5\) Uri Ram affirms this statement, pronouncing that "These trends reflect and articulate the interests and identities of new groups and social movements, and more generally, a widespread mood of scepticism towards conventions and 'sacred cows.'"\(^6\)

After the 1982 war in Lebanon, the massacres at Sabra and Shatila, and later with the 1987 Intifada, the crisis of Israeli identity had collectively peaked. Adi Ofir writes that it was because of these events that, "the figuring of the other as victim subverted the self-image of the Zionist occupying the victim position and has come to reflect the end of Zionism."\(^7\) An additional distinction emerged after the 1982 Lebanon War, between wars engaged for immediate defence and insurance for the survival of the collective, and wars fought for the improvement of Israel's military and political placement in the Middle East. Several questions began dominating Israeli political debate: were the events of 1982 necessary for the existence of the collective? May a polity manage a war for considerable political benefits, which is not strictly necessary for the survival of the nation? Laurence Silberstein declares, "The trauma of Lebanon became the equivalent of the trauma of Vietnam in the US of the 1960s and 1970s."\(^8\)

For decades Zionism ascribed words such as ascent (aliya), settlement (hityashvut), pioneers (khalutzim) and salvation (geula) to the actions of the state. But a new perspective arose that saw the history of the Jewish Yishuv (settlement) in Israel as grounded in colonialism. This new approach remains highly contentious. Ram states that colonisation is perceived as a slander for the majority of Israelis. He articulates that

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The consideration of Israel as a colonialist society, implying that the Jews conquered and plundered the land and exploited or expelled the native dwellers, goes against the grain of the Zionist self-portrayal as a movement of 'a people without a land returning to a land without people'. It is considered repugnant by Israel's Zionist left wing, which traditionally has professed self-liberation and redemption of a wasteland through toil, and by Israel's right wing, which traditionally has advocated that the 'whole land of Israel' is an incontestable asset of the Jewish people by 'historical right' and providential covenant.\(^9\)

Nonetheless, postcolonial studies have continued in Israel, as they have elsewhere. Historians and sociologists stress that postcolonial theory invokes an examination of peoples and cultures that have emerged from colonial rule. Such interrogations have also generated area-studies such as minority discourse, in recognition that ‘minority’ cultures are ‘majority’ realities. This enables the study of non-canonical literatures and encourages a deconstruction of the political elements of the canon. In other words, that which prevented these realities and subject positions from occupying centre stage is now under scrutiny. New areas of study influenced by postmodern and postcolonial methodologies examine the way in which Zionism produced and disseminated contested representations of Jewish history, culture, community and identity. As such, Laurence Silberstein writes, "far from simply describing or reflecting objective conditions, these categories participate in the construction of these conditions."\(^10\)

The 1990s saw changes in Israeli demography, its relationship with other countries, and Israeli collective identity. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in mass migrations of Russian Jews into Israel. Concurrently, foreign workers replaced the diminishing Palestinian workforce. With Israel establishing itself as a leading country in high-tech innovation and production and competing to exist on a par with other European economies, the boundaries between Israeli and global arts, culture, and academic debate have become increasingly porous. Although Israel never developed an insular cultural environment, the 1990s and 2000s have undoubtedly seen an influx of rhetoric that has rapidly replaced Zionist slogans, most notably in popular media.

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Israeli fiction written since the 1960s has existed dialectically with this historiography, and following is an introduction to its ever-changing character.

*Shifts in Israeli Fiction: The ‘New Wave’*

Corresponding to these historical shifts in Israel, three broad phases can be identified in Israeli literature: writings from the pre-state period until the 1950s, prose and poetry written between the 1960s and the mid 1980s, and literature written from the mid 1980s until today. These three roughly mapped periods are by no means strictly defined, and works produced during these periods may defy the general character attributed to each. They are, however, helpful in structuring the present analysis.

New Wave authors writing since the 1960s championed two main areas of fiction: ‘ethnic’ literature, and women’s writing. Previously, non-European ethnic groups had been neither represented nor celebrated by Zionism.\(^{11}\) For decades of statehood European Jews were not considered ‘ethnic’, while non-European Jews had occupied the subject position of ‘other’ in Zionist discourse. As Ofir writes, “The melting pot of Jewish ethnic communities has become an over-boiling pot of ethnic and religious conflicts.”\(^{12}\) Furthermore, Israeli nationalism and in particular national unity, argues Hever, “is an empty slogan that witnesses the shattering of unity to pieces.”\(^{13}\) The collapse of the Zionist dream meant the experience of those disenfranchised groups now became recognised as needing further interrogation.

As the literary arena began encouraging non-Ashkenazi writers, women writers too were seen to be heralding a new era of pluralism. Many women authors continued pre-existing thematic interests, while others concentrated on gender in Israeli culture, shifting the readers’ gaze to female subject positions in

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11 These are mainly Sephardi Jews, exiled from Spain in 1492, now an umbrella term for Jews of non-European origin, including African and Middle-Eastern Jews, defined as against Ashkenazi Jews from Europe.


Israel and the Jewish world. Simultaneously, the masculine construct has also undergone examination in Israeli literature. Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, and Yaakov Shabbai are prominent authors who have delved into the gendered nature of Israeli society. More recently, Benny Tziper has written fiction about homosexuality in Israel. Anne Golomb Hoffman observes:

In...writers such as Yaakov Shabbai and A. B. Yehoshua and several others, we see that the repressed underside of the virile image of the new Jew is not projected onto another who is external to the self, but rather is held within and returns to disrupt the neat outlines of conscious identity and the political assertion of that identity. The effect of the fiction of these writers is to disrupt ideologically loaded conceptions of masculinity.14

1970s literature by authors of the ‘New Wave’ often dwells on the twin concepts of utopia and apocalypse, reflecting the fragmented reaction to the 1973 war. This turn towards utopia in fiction paralleled the emergence of messianic political movements in Israel. “Sickly nostalgia”15 and elegiac writing, lamenting the loss of the ideals and dreams of the founding pioneers of Israel, dominated this literature. Often the utopia was communicated through a return to childhood. By telling of the past from the perspective of a child, the innocence and brutality that had ended the utopia could be expressed more purely. Works of this kind were written by Amos Oz, Shulamit Hareven, Hanoch Bartov, Chaim Guri, Yehoshua Kenaz and Yizhak Orpaz.16

One of the most acclaimed works expressing the process of loss is Yaakov Shabbai’s Past Continuous (1977). In this novel, the connection to the past has become an Oedipal struggle formulated as a need to destroy the past, both private and national, in order to salvage the present. The use of a child narrator has continued to be a popular feature in Israeli literature of this kind, writes Gadi

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16 Hever, Literature Written from Here 98-99.
Taub, adding, “in the protected area of our childhood, mental and inner ruminations can exist uninterrupted”.

From the mid 1960s onwards, especially after the 1967 war, fiction became increasingly allegorical, covertly critiquing the institutions that govern society in Israel. Other areas of innovation by ‘New Wave’ writers included magic realism, and the emergence of postmodern narrative techniques. Influenced by South American writers, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Israeli authors David Grossman in See Under: Love (1986) and Meir Shalev in The Blue Mountain (1988) fused the fantastic with the realistic, so that partial use of fantasy is made within an otherwise realistic context.

It would be a mistake to read these ‘New Wave’ novels as signifying a call for political revolution. The yearning is a nostalgic one for a past that can never be restored – and perhaps never even existed. Shaked describes this literature as conservative rather than revolutionary, pining for a lost paradise, but not attempting to build a new one. This point is of central significance, for these authors have not abandoned the Zionist project despite highlighting its deficiencies. In a sense the dream still lives. The paradox is that whilst remaining avowed Zionists these authors’ descriptions of Zionism are not remotely celebratory. They tend to be some of the most trenchant critics of Israel, and see in the old canon a lamentable deficiency: an inability to recognise, let alone engage with, the failings of Zionism.

Further Shifts in Fiction: The ‘Different Wave’

The next period that brings us up to date with contemporary writing in Israel is particularly difficult to define. Avraham Balaban has termed this trend the ‘Different Wave’ in Hebrew literature. Hever calls it ‘post-national’, and will be referred to within this study by the unfortunately loaded term ‘post-Zionist’ literature. It is typified by increased commercialism, a blurring of the boundaries between high art forms and popular literature, ‘lean writing’, and alternative

17 Gadi Taub, The Dispirited Rebellion (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997) 15.

18 Shaked, "Challenges and Question Marks, on the Political Meaning of Hebrew Fiction in the Seventies and Eighties," 17.
poetic forms that deconstruct language and representation.\textsuperscript{19} Hever writes, “The 1990s have...seen a marked tendency to disrupt and disturb the national allegory.”\textsuperscript{20} The ideological deterioration perceived by the authors of the ‘New Wave’ and embodied in the character of the lone floundering Israeli individual/hero, was taken by younger generations as trivial rather than pathetic.

These new writers do not long for the ideology of the past. They look elsewhere for solutions to the existential questions of their predecessors. The conscientious fervour in the writing of the founding fathers has now become an object for recycling and pastiche and is recognised as obsolete. Literature at this time severed itself from the need to sustain a historical dialogue with earlier literature. The native Israeli hero, such as Moshe Shamir’s Elik in \textit{With his Own Hands} (1951) or the protagonists of Shabtal’s \textit{Past Continuous} no longer exists. While ‘New Wave’ writers tried to expose the suppression behind the monolithic image of the ‘new Hebrew’, postmodern literature takes this process one step further in questioning some of the assumptions both author and reader have about the ways in which this can be done. David Gurevitz reasons that postmodern literature is no longer a willing participant in canonical commitments and turns away from tragic pathos, preferring to describe life through the grotesque and blackly comic.

Postmodern writers prefer to describe the world from a perspective that is no longer determined according to a moral or ideological ground. Authors such as Etgar Keret, Yuval Shimoni, Orly Kastel-Blum, Yosef El-Dror, Leah Ayalon and Yoel Hoffmann commonly describe the absence of a normative framework in a world where distress is not the result of restriction or lack, but of a seeming excess of choices be they ideological, religious, material or sexual. In the words of Gadi Taub, describing one of Etgar Keret’s protagonists

\begin{quote}
The world around him whirs violently and becomes not only violent, but also obstructed. Politics and paternal relationships are mixed, violence, sex, miserliness, curiosity and love are mixed, a teacher without authority and studies
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Hever, \textit{Literature Written from Here} 10.

and punishment, justice and sadism...the world becomes completely lacking in order and meaning.\textsuperscript{21}

Postmodern literature is often seen as bleak and nihilistic. It is possible, however, to locate an ethical component within it. Postmodern texts can be seen as raising the reader’s awareness to his or her level of desensitisation in comparison with their forebears. In so doing, postmodern authors can be said to create a new relationship between the reader and the mechanisms of power around her or him.

Finally, there is the question of ‘the function of literature’. Authors of both the New and Different Waves question the limits of the sayable and representable. These authors re-examine their function in the affirmation or subversion of power structures in Israel. With the collapse of an ideological centre in the literary arena in Israel, canonised works are seen as both dictating and limiting that which can be said or thought within a discursive system. Both New and Different Wave authors, in their own ways, have brought to the fore the constraints a writer works under, a responsibility phrased by Ofir as follows: “It is the duty of the artist or the poet who faces an absolute loss to force into presence, in and through the very activity of representation, the failure of representation.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{The Military in Israeli Literature}

The current study reveals the changing nature of Israeli identity through the vehicle of the soldier hero in Israeli literature. The particular ways in which Israeli identity has shifted since the formative years of the state will be explored as they have become manifested in fiction. That which is found in Israeli literature is not easily rescued from other media – the subtleties of identification, the depth of emotion, whims and desires – these basic elements of life are found in fiction, and contain, for the purpose of answering the questions stated earlier, the raw material of Israeli collective identity. For when a book is written, it not only expresses the writer’s own perspective, but as a communicative medium it enters

\textsuperscript{21} Taub, \textit{The Dispirited Rebellion} 83-84.

\textsuperscript{22} Ofir, "The Identity of the Victims and the Victims of Identity, a Critique of Zionist Ideology for a Post-Zionist Age," 176.
the whirlpool of collective imagination, which in turn informs the discourse of our changing identity.

This study is divided into three areas of examination so as to provide a selected view of the fictional representations of the military experience in Israeli literature. The first chapter contains an exploration of three works that depict the changing gender boundaries of the military hero in Israeli fiction. The three works, although written during different phases in Israeli history, challenge the Palmach image of the hyper-masculine soldier hero through the depiction of his relationships with other men and women in both the military and civilian settings. The examination outlines Zionist gender discourse in order to better comprehend recently shifting gender paradigms in Israeli literature and society. As Paula Hyman aptly wrote, "gender scholarship points the way to a healthy scepticism about master narratives."\(^{23}\)

The second chapter examines the relationship between the military institution and the soldier as its subject. This relationship demands an analysis of changing approaches within Israeli society towards nationalism. Additionally, recent sociological studies of the Israeli Defence Forces are investigated, in particular aspects of the IDF that have come under recent scrutiny for their role in the continued military conflict. The three works discussed in the second chapter, written at different points in Israeli history, contain the seeds for the demilitarisation of Israeli society. The military experience as conveyed in these works is heavily charged with civilian social functions, burdens the individual, and normalises the continued conflict.

In the third chapter more recent works concerning the military experience are examined. These works come under the ‘Different Wave’ rubric. These fictions, which may be generalised as postmodern or ‘post-Zionist,’ undeniably express the negative function of the military in individuals’ lives. These works also raise questions about the function of literature in the subversion or acquiescence to the state of society in the face of such militarisation.

Several gender presumptions have been made in this study. The soldier experience is investigated herein not as a reflection of an individual’s real

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experience, but as a metonym for processes that occur outside the military, in the civilian sphere. There is no specific mention in this study of women’s experience in the military as it does not further the interrogation of the questions that inform this work, although it is an area of study that is slowly gaining recognition as a principal marker of Israeli society. However, it should be stated that transformations in Israeli identity explored throughout this study do not impact exclusively on men.

Military fiction serves as a prism through which broader social processes can be examined. Ben Knights argues that understanding fiction as simply ‘the telling of stories’ is flawed, because a story merely evokes the norms, conventions and formulae that generate fiction and determine the way in which it is read.24 This study demonstrates that history acquires meaning in and through the very act of storytelling.

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Chapter One

The Fading Outlines of the Warrior Hero

One of the most potent icons in Israeli society is the warrior hero: the man in military uniform. Even before Independence, this gendered stereotype has functioned as a normative image or symbol of Jewish masculinity and promoted men’s involvement in military activity. The image of the warrior hero strengthened individual commitment to the collective national ethos in a way that overarched political difference. In a significant body of fiction written in Israel since the 1960s, this image of the masculine ideal has been challenged and subverted, raising questions as to the validity of the military imperative and its implications. This chapter will demonstrate, through the twin analyses of history and literature, the ways in which military masculinity has come undone.

Historically speaking, the Zionist narration presents Jewish history as divisible into three periods. The first is that of antiquity, a period of glory, self-determination, and military prowess. This phase is followed by exile, characterised in Jewish - specifically Zionist - rhetoric as a period of passivity and disintegration. The final period, which many believe has not yet ended, is that of national revival. This third phase is a natural culmination of this historical development, according to the Zionist narrative. National revival is enabled by a restoration of the vigour anchored in antiquity, a revitalized formulation of national pride, and a renewed bond with the land of Israel.

It was not until the implications of the Israeli victory in the 1967 Six-Day War became apparent, that the image of the warrior hero became contested. Israeli literature written since this time reveals another phase in this historical process. This era is one of revision, introspection and a fracturing of the Zionist narrative. Central to this process is the defiance of masculine icons grounded in an ongoing martial tradition.

Following is an exploration of the evolution of Jewish masculinity. The historiography that follows traces the formation of the ‘New Jew,’ the warrior

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hero. Only with an understanding of the centrality and function of this icon in Israeli consciousness can the analysis then proceed to discuss the works of fiction. The texts interrogated thereafter will illustrate the ways in which Zionist masculinity and militarism have been fractured during this latest period.

*History: Formulae of Gender for the New Jew*

The Zionist project is the direct result of the conjoining of two elements: Jewish history and tradition, and the intellectual movement of eighteenth century Europe known as the Enlightenment. Central to Enlightenment thought were gender roles as part of one’s social identity. Manifestations of the drive to classify and categorize these gender roles reflected deeper power dynamics. These were to be assumed by the members of each nation, giving rise to national solidarity. Gender definitions became a direct corollary of nationalism and as the latter became more solidly and popularly defined, gender became the locus for achieving ideal nationalisation. In other words, achieving correct gender self-definition was perceived as a fundamental aspect of the individual’s self-cultivation, or Bildung, giving rise to national unity and supremacy. Ideal gender types were therefore perceived as supporting ideal national types.

The ideal men and women the nation sought to promote, created in turn the countertypes, the various ‘others’ that populated the collective imagination of each nation. The body became the clearest expression of masculine and feminine ideals. Therefore, it was the very bodies of the Jews, blacks, gypsies and vagrants, the countertypes to the European masculine ideal, which attested to their lack of value as national subjects. Those groups’ bodies were the clearest testimony of their conflicted position to the ideal gender types. George Mosse writes, “How many of such outsiders have attempted to become insiders through reconstructing their bodies and adjusting their comportment according to the male aesthetic ideal?”

Within the worldview of ‘enlightened’ Western European Jews, Eastern European Jewry, the Ostjuden, constituted such a countertype. The latter were

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perceived as living squalidly in the shtetl, glued to tradition and absorbed by The Book. Their ethnicity was associated with a failing to evolve in order to meet the requirements of enlightened civilisation. Jewish Enlightenment called for a ‘doing away’ with such attachments, which many saw as justifying or at least promoting anti-Semitism. Modern masculinity in Europe was based on a physical ideal and its countertypes either emulated it or were defined against it. This gender dichotomy led to a physical and mental feminisation of Jewish males. As Daniel Boyarin writes, “the project of [political Zionists] was to transform Jewish men into the type of male that they admired, namely, the ideal ‘Aryan’ male.”

Theodore Herzl’s Alteneland (1902) conjured the utopic landscape of Palestine, tamed at the hands of a hard-bodied pioneer. This was Max Nordau’s “muskeljudentum” – the muscle-Jew, a product of Enlightenment rhetoric that despised Jewish ‘degeneration’ in the ghetto. Herzl and Nordau advocated a re-examination of Jewish masculinity by looking at one’s Jewish self through non-Jewish eyes. Descriptions of the male heroes of the time illustrate this. A particular example is Shlomo Schiller’s portrayal of Joseph Trumpeldor: “There was not a hint of sickness in him, not of nervousness, rashness or distress – characteristics that mark the Diaspora Jew.”

How then, did Zionism succeed in integrating Jewish tradition into this scheme? According to the three periods mapped earlier – Jewish antiquity, exile, and national revival – the degeneration of Jews in Europe could now be explained as a transitional phase between two glorious periods. Antiquity represents a time when men and women were the embodiment of ideal gender types that enabled the national self-determination attributed to this era. Exile is perceived correspondingly as a time when Jewish gender constructions declined, and masculinity and femininity became distorted, perverted, and ‘degenerate’. National revival marks a return to ‘proper’ gender definitions within pioneering Jewry. Participation in the Zionist project was a central component of this

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5 Cited in Oz Almog, The Sabra - a Profile (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1997) 143.
process of gendering. Men could once again fight in defence of their nation as they had in ancient times, emulating Samson, David and Bar-Kochva.

These were the elements to feature most strongly in the rhetoric of pioneering Zionism. This rhetoric stressed the importance of the destruction of old norms in order to cement new ideals. It further advocated the subservience of the individual to the collective cause. Fusion of the various ideas that fuelled Zionism led to the internalisation of conflicting messages: universalism and national particularism, a love for humanity yet a hatred for the Goy, tolerance as well as military zeal, devotion to the Jewish nation andanimosity and mockery towards Diaspora Jewry, and a vision of peace and reconciliation combined with an overt aspiration for power.\(^6\) The kibbutz member, with his embodiment of these ideals, emerged as the closest example of the ‘new Jew’. Despite the contradictions between the various models, commonalities were emphasised, mainly through their simplification.

Oz Almog argues that the contradictory elements of Zionist gender rhetoric are not oppositional. He claims that Zionist discourse contains complementary values, typical of a young society oscillating between the needs of the collective and the needs of the individual. These tensions in Zionist ideology express the conflict between Jewishness and anti-Jewishness, between a yearning for utopia on one hand and pragmatism on the other, between a push for renovation as well as institutionalisation, and between a perceived need for war, as well as peace.\(^7\)

These incongruities gave rise to a uniquely Zionist twist on military masculinity. The military man, in particular the commander of the military unit, was imagined in the 1930s and 1940s as typifying charismatic leadership rather than bureaucratic authority. His reserved expression was emphasised and he was seen as a compelling father figure admired for his humane virtues. In other words, it was not his rank that made him leader, but his natural sense of leadership that imbued him with the ability to guide his troops. He was often perceived as undertaking the role of commander without aiming for personal promotion or gain. Being a regular, probably farming civilian who left his farm

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\(^7\) Almog, *The Sabra - a Profile* 383.
and family to come to the aid of his people, he would return to his anonymous existence after the war. Both agriculture and the military became vehicles for grounding his roots in the territory. Almog comments that this gave rise to the self-image of Israel as "not a militaristic society that seeks war, but a society that fights only when there is need."\(^8\)

Since 1948 and the establishment of the state of Israel, the centrality of the military experience has not waned in the formulation of the ideal man. Reuven Ben-Gal, chief psychologist of the Israeli army in 1982, wrote that "to be an Israeli adult means in one way or another to be a soldier.\(^9\) Participation in Israeli military tradition has been institutionalised by Zionism as an initiation rite into Israeli masculinity. Danny Kaplan writes, "All Israeli-Jewish men, regardless of their actual participation in the military, are exposed in one way or another to the ritual of security and must relate to it.\(^10\) The centrality of militarism to Israeli manhood therefore remains paramount, regardless of actual participation in the military. This "sets the stage for the military as a collective and sanctified initiation rite to be experienced by each man individually.\(^11\)

Zionism prompted a formulation of Jewish masculinity based on the wish to rid the new society of exilic associations with effeminacy and passivity. These were to be replaced with a fighting spirit anchored in antiquity. The existence of Palestine in the decades preceding independence justified military activity and combined gender rhetoric to contribute to the centrality of martial tradition. Military experience and combat thus became necessary reference points for Jewish men in Israel. The image of the military man assumed mythic proportions; it became a fixed identity that purported to be the absolute embodiment of the Zionist masculine ideal.

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History: Masculinity Perfected in Palmdach Literature

The image of masculinity disseminated by Zionism was not only perfectly captured but also propagated by Palmdach literature. This corpus is otherwise known as Sabra literature for its embodiment of the ‘native’ Israeli ethos. This fiction was published between the 1930s and 1960s by authors born before Independence. These writers were tagged Palmdach authors because many of them were members of the Palmdach fighting corps. Most shared a tight bond with the political and social establishment of Labour Zionism, mainly as kibbutz members. Their works were concerned primarily with the War of Independence and told the collective national story of the young state and its Jewish inhabitants.

These authors examined Israeli life through the prism of complete identification with the ideals that inspired Israel’s founding. The central characters are usually young men who progress from the frivolity of youth to an understanding that ideology and collective solidarity are paramount. Anita Shapira observes that ”it seems the myth of the ‘new Jew’ was created in the realm of New Hebrew literature, but soon enough became a political and ideological battle slogan [sismat krav].”\(^{12}\) It was this literature that first gave shape and character to the particularities of the ‘new Jew’ in Israel. Palmdach authors such as Moshe Shamir, Yigal Moseinzon, Aharon Megged, Yehudit Hendel, Avraham Shlonsky and Binyamin Tamuz, as well as poet Natan Alterman, were deeply influenced by the European canons of socialist realism. A. B. Yafe wrote in 1950 that in their works ”everything is just and clear, and there is no room for conflict or imbalance.”\(^{13}\)

Palmach fiction is marked by renewal. With the revival of the Hebrew language, Hebrew prose and poetry was also reinvented. Accordingly, the protagonists of these works conveyed personal and national rejuvenation. Self-consciously Israeli, the youths that populated this fiction were the tabula rasa on which the new ideals and ambitions of the nascent state could be etched. The heroes at the forefront of these works are stereotypical Sabras: devoted to their

\(^{12}\) Shapira, New Jews, Old Jews 158.

nation and generation, serious in outlook, not overly reliant on verbal communication. They are often imbued with a tragic quality, having to sacrifice their lives to the struggle for independence. They are merely mirrors for the collective, resulting in an abandonment of any unconscious or incongruous elements in their characters.

Masculine beauty is emphasised in these works. In Yosef Luidor’s story “Yehuda the Orchard Watchman” (1976), a late example, the title character is described as:

A young man of about thirty, with a mighty body, broad shoulders and strong physique. As he stands in his place, and his legs, anchored in high sandals, are spread to the sides with his hands shoved deeply in his trouser pockets, his mighty chest inflated. Then he looks like a solid rock rooted in the ground.14

The protagonists are often tall, symbolically taller than their parents’ generation. They are frequently thin, upright, bare-footed, wearing a threadbare work-shirt, in sharp contrast to the stereotypical exilic Jew. Often placed in a situation of conflict with their social environment, their maturation is invariably conducted in accordance with the Zionist narrative. Theirs is a symbolic experience underscored by militarism, a collective rite of passage into the collective Zionist world. War in this fiction, writes Hanan Hever, serves to settle social contradictions and conflicts.15 The Palmach fictional meta-narrative fortifies the war ethos, because it arises out of the common national story. The authors of the Palmach generation celebrated these images in exultant admiration for the new nation and identity that was forming on the land. The majority of Palmach literature served to mythologise and propagate the image of the new Jewish man, and the ideals and values that determined his function in the collective consciousness of Jewish society.

14 Almog, The Sabra - a Profile 132-33.
Literature: Masculinity in Transition in 'New Wave' Military Fiction

In the aftermath to the war of Independence attitudes to militarism began shifting. With each of the subsequent wars, the debate surrounding the military imperative grew. Both the image of the invincible military hero and the self-perception of Israeli society became contested. The battle cry ‘it is good to die for our country’ held little sway when Israel fought in Lebanon, on foreign soil. The 1987 Intifada placed further obstacles before the military hero. In this struggle between the Israeli army and Palestinian civilians, the ‘purity of arms’ code – the need to keep the weapon ‘pure’ by using it only for self-defence - was challenged. This prompted one soldier to write in a daily newspaper that “there is no purity in the club and no morality in tear gas.”

These changes manifested themselves in the public attitude towards militarism. Consequently, the representation of the military experience in Israeli fiction has also changed. The warrior hero is no longer an incontestable subject.

Throughout the period encompassed by ‘New Wave’ fiction there existed a conservative minority in the literary arena, which rejected its protest. Hillel Weiss wrote in 1975 that the works of authors such as Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua are “fabricated historical novels” that intentionally ignore history in favour of a fraudulent existentialism. Weiss made the further claim that in cultivating self-negating heroes, or anti-heroes, the works of such authors are demonic (however aesthetically pleasing) and constitute a “poisonous contribution” to Israeli society.

In contrast to this view, this study adopts the view that the works of ‘New Wave’ authors emerge not from a need to negate the Jewish self, nor from an objection to collective Jewish existence in Israel. Their drive is the need to revise the undisputable price that is paid for the sake of collective Jewish supremacy in Israel. These writers question the personal cost of safeguarding power relations in the Middle East.

17 Hillel Weiss, Portraits of the Fighter, Reflections on Heroes and Heroism in the Hebrew Prose of the Last Decade (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University and the Israeli Defence Ministry, 1975) 17.
18 Weiss, Portraits of the Fighter 27.
In the reading of the fictional texts, gender emerges as one of the areas under revision. Stories written after 1977 often dwell on male characters who reach their midlife only to find the institutions they have struggled to sustain are hollow and crumbling. The marital institution disintegrates, often giving way to adultery. As a result, the male protagonists embark on a journey of self-rediscovery. They often crave sexual encounters with women who are positioned on the margins of conventional femininity. Their careers are fossilising, their offspring fail to perform in the institutions of the state, and their creative juices have stopped flowing. These themes can be found in works by Yaakov Shabtai, Aharon Megged, and in Yehuda Amichai’s prose. It is also a theme prevalent in the military fiction discussed below and characterises ‘New Wave’ portrayals of military masculinity in Israel.

*The War for Manhood: Yitzhak Ben-Ner’s “Nicole”*

Gershon Shaked characterised the works of Yitzhak Ben-Ner (born in Israel in 1937) as “elegies that bare satiric claws, or satires which are motivated by elegiac longing.”¹⁹ Ben-Ner is concerned with the social reality in Israel surrounding the political upheaval of 1977 and passes critical comment on the state of society, exposing the corruption of the political and social establishment of his time.

“Nicole” is a short story that appeared in the collection *Rustic Sunset* (1976). It depicts the relationship between Nicole Leibovitz, a tempestuous woman in her twenties, and Berko (Baruch) Adar, a retired career-officer in the Israeli army, twenty years her senior. The story takes place in the months following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the war is the central event in the story, the main thematic axis around which it unravels. Berko is haunted by feelings of inadequacy and guilt, as he was tardy in his arrival to the battlefield and was consequently discharged. Concurrently, Nicole is haunted by personal guilt resulting from the choices she has made, and the hollowness and desperation she feels have come to dominate her life.

The relationship between Nicole and Berko is magnetic. The features that attracted them to each other during Nicole’s regular service in Sinai are the same elements that repel and lead her to leave him. She invariably returns a few months later. The war at the foreground of the story mirrors the personal war between the pair.

Nicole, always on the offensive, is an emotionally abusive lover and punishes Berko for his misgivings as an officer and the manner in which he lives his private life. In the words of Ben-Ner, Nicole is "the embodiment of the corrupt, destructive, immoral self-satisfaction of the beautiful, smug days before October 1973." A middle-class Israeli couple, their relationship is devoid of compassion and as such evidence of the decadent, self-destructive void Ben-Ner identifies in Israel at the time of his writing. Ben-Ner chose a barren, estranged couple through which to communicate the woes he identifies in the society around him.

The story opens with a chilling description of the alienation between the two:

He doesn’t sleep. He doesn’t sleep. How long can he go on like this? She stares at him in the soft dimness. The smell of bedding. Of his body. Of sweat. He pulls the shutters down when they turn off the lights, as if shy of the street. After he finishes with her and she with him, their bodies slacken and grow quiet and soft, he lying on his back, his short, powerful arms folded beneath his neck. And she, naked, gets up on her knees and pulls open the shutters. Thin, pale light bursts in with the chill wind. Then they lie quietly, apart, their eyes shut.

Ben-Ner sketches Berko’s masculinity as macho and distant: "his old army shorts, his underwear, with his hairy chest, his sweaty brow, a finger that constantly brushes across his upper lip, a cigarette in his mouth, in an agony so great that only he could hold in." Berko’s militaristic masculinity makes him untouchable. He searches for ways to undo the damage of his performance during the war:

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21 Ben-Ner, Rustic Sunset and Other Stories 149.

22 Ben-Ner, Rustic Sunset and Other Stories 150.
Something that will transform everything and restore it to its previous condition. Rank. Duty. Uniform. Promotion. Unbridled admiration. Regained stature. A face free of wrinkles. A gaze that once again will be arrogant. His walk, his easy and self-assured gait, towards the endless expanse of sand.\textsuperscript{23}

His need to revert back to the man he once was underscores the argument that this story is a parable for the emasculation of Israeli men. The country’s 1973 defeat resulted in Berko’s loss of his identity as a man, both to himself and to Nicole. He was once a brazen ladies’ man, exuding authority and confidence. Once he is no longer that man, Nicole is repelled by what he has become. Aware of this, Berko tries to salvage any shred of his diminishing military masculinity.

The war, we are forced to realise, was not only a war for the security of Israel. In fact, no mention is made of the political elements of the campaigns. It was also a war fought by men on a more primal level, to protect the unstable gender boundaries that had guided them thence far. Nicole’s yearning for another man, a young officer who died in the course of the war, expresses this theme aptly. The young soldier, “with the hesitation of virgin youth,”\textsuperscript{24} whose death has been attributed to Berko’s decisions as his superior, died before he could fail the test of masculinity.

Berko, the failed man, is the embodiment of a man who has lost his innocence. He is no longer living in an illusion of eternal heroism, of endless stamina and machismo. He must now accept that which he has become and acknowledge the relationship with his younger lover must also end. When he fails to appear at his station on time, his superiors “scold him like a small boy”\textsuperscript{25}, later his lover ceases to see in him a viable sexual partner. Ben-Ner writes, “he’s another man. Older. Tired. Taciturn. Yielding. Forgiving. Compromising.”\textsuperscript{26}

After the war, weak and injured, Berko tries to assert his authority before Nicole. He touches her face in a protective, fatherly way, but his attempts fail. Her distance from him only increases. She can sense his approaches are hollow.

\textsuperscript{23} Ben-Ner, \textit{Rustic Sunset and Other Stories} 152.

\textsuperscript{24} Ben-Ner, \textit{Rustic Sunset and Other Stories} 161.

\textsuperscript{25} Ben-Ner, \textit{Rustic Sunset and Other Stories} 162.

\textsuperscript{26} Ben-Ner, \textit{Rustic Sunset and Other Stories} 170.
In her mind, he failed to protect the young soldier. "If he’s guilty, he’s guilty," she thinks to herself, "Why run around in circles? Let him bow his head." Completely emasculated, he is “an old man being made the fool by a naughty child.”

Nicole also emerges as a loser in this war. For in the dichotomy of gender, once masculinity is challenged and is defeated, its counterpoint suffers as well. As though dragged along by her man’s defeat, her attempts to set herself free are futile. She feels shackled to a dishonourable, pitiful partner. Ben-Ner writes of this as though listing the descending rungs in Nicole and Berko’s irreversible process of spiralling towards an abyss:

So that’s the way it has been. The apartment. The meetings at the university. The gloomy struggle to shake herself free. The people on the street. The stares at the premiere she drags him to. The names on the mailbox and under the doorbell. The desolate days that pass. The evenings in front of the television. The pain. The long nights without rest for the body or succour for the soul. The distress. The dimness in the mornings when the blinds are down. The shame. The pay checks coming in the mail. The stack of papers. The resentment. The neighbours. His eyes, lowered. The hostility inside her. The coldness she emits towards him. The beginning of his old age. His surrender to her. Her experiments in leaving the apartment, walking, running, never to return. Her impatient waiting for him to return. The hatred rising up in her, lately, when the familiar hum of the car dies down outside. The weakness, the exhaustion, the emptiness, the fading rage and hope after a desperate, hard, sweaty, sensual love. The sinking into snatched sleep and waking up without him. The shame. The cold water flowing over her but not removing a thing in the morning, when everything starts to sprout in her anew. Everything. Everything. Everything. Mother. Mother. Am being eaten away. I am being eaten away. I can’t go on.

The story indeed ends in an abyss. Nicole collapses into a fantasy, cradled by memories of the desert before 1973 and the men that surrounded her there, enclosed by their love. This was the time when men were Men and women were Women; the time before the battle for masculinity was lost.

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27 Ben-Ner, *Rustic Sunset and Other Stories* 169.
28 Ben-Ner, *Rustic Sunset and Other Stories* 170.
29 Ben-Ner, *Rustic Sunset and Other Stories* 172-73.
The Absent Father: Yoram Kaniuk’s ‘His Daughter’

I have this feeling that for authors, artists and military people, work becomes a kind of obsession...I chose a military man whose disability, if it is a disability, whose problem, if it is a problem, is that he can disconnect for a month and not think at all that he’s got a daughter, or a wife, or a family. 

Yoram Kaniuk

Yoram Kaniuk was born in 1930 in Tel Aviv. He has enjoyed a prolific career, including the publication of over one hundred works, and remains a prolific writer to this day. *His Daughter (Bito)* (1987) is the writer’s eighth novel. Kaniuk’s writing is influenced by modern expressionism, with frequent use of grotesque elements, bordering on the surreal. His works are highly autobiographical, and names often crossover from work to work, accumulating to form an ‘anatomy’ of Israeli society. Gabriel Moked claims that Kaniuk’s writing has always been risky, which has, in the past, enabled the author to break through generic constraints, paving important paths in Israeli stream-of-consciousness and magic realism. His *Daughter* portrays the military man in another scenario that illustrates the subversion of Zionist gender paradigms in Israeli fiction.

Kaniuk is at odds with the dominant tropes of his own milieu, the Palmach generation. Yet his works are also dissimilar to those of his latter day contemporaries: Kenaz, Oz and Yehoshua. Bartana writes, “this absence of a tag made him indigestible by the establishment.”32 Typified by the fusion of magic realism and Jewish and Israeli themes, his major works appeared in Israel prior to the popularity of the South American magical realists. However, Bartana, Gabriel Moked, Amnon Navot and Roni Somek, as well as a wide audience, have consistently advocated Kaniuk’s importance as an Israeli writer.

His Daughter, said to represent “yet another attempt at demythologising,” is a permutation on the theme of generations. More specifically, Kaniuk explores the way in which the fathers’ sins are a burden to the next generation, and how it is also the sons and daughters who pay for them. The central character is that of Joseph Rieger, who goes in search of his missing daughter, Miriam. The novel concerns the motif of disappearance, not only of the daughter, but of security and certainty, mirrored in the faded masculinity of the protagonists.

Rieger is a middle-aged father, a divorcee. Once a national war hero, he is now retired, due to what he claims was slander, the accusation that he killed a Palestinian prisoner. He decides to go in search of his missing daughter, but she turns out to have committed suicide. Rieger himself also attempts suicide. He says of himself

My whole life was one long gruelling preparation for an event which never really happened. The wars that I had fought were just the minor fulfilment of a dream...they were never the war I’d wanted. I had never tapped the secret overwhelming capacity for human endurance...I had trained myself to be strong, daring, resourceful even going without food or water, such that one day I might meet the challenge, body and soul, of some hopeless struggle.

This is a character that has carried out to the letter all the injunctions of the Palmach generation. And yet he finds himself at the end of it all, a man completely unfulfilled. Through the exposition of Rieger’s character as an anti-hero Kaniuk posits an alternative mythology that touches on gender and ideological ground. Rieger is self-effacing and self-sacrificing in his relationships, particularly with women. He has been faithful to his adulterous wife Nina, a loving yet distant father to their daughter, and a courageous (yet questionable) career officer. Ultimately, he emerges as a failure. His wife and daughter both rejected him. Leon Yudkin asserts that, “Merely by checking the facts of his

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34 In the Hebrew version of the novel his name is Ahiasaf. As quotes are taken from the English translation the English names will be used throughout the current analysis.
35 In the Hebrew version of the novel her name is Hamutal.
personal biography, the biography that he had created so strongly, so consistently, and, as it transpires, so disastrously, he sinks into oblivion.”

In this work, trying to draw a genealogical family tree is made complicated by a love triangle gone to seed – virtually every character is romantically involved with every other character. Despite the many erotic tensions and couplings in the novel, the pages are devoid of love or intimacy. Empty lust and unemotional sex abound, heightening the austerity of the novel. Conversely, all the characters are marked by death. Rieger’s wife, Nina, is a victim of the Holocaust; his neighbours are Holocaust survivors; Miriam’s childhood friend died of cancer aged only nine; even her dog dies tragically. Rieger, who possessed the curious ability to foresee which private would die in interaction with the enemy, becomes attached to the picture of Yitzhak, a young soldier who died under his command. He brings the soldier’s photograph home, and Miriam, then aged only five, becomes obsessed with it, ultimately falling in love with the dead soldier. She subsequently remains attached to his family until the moment of her own death.

Rieger brought death into the house and ensured it stayed there as a permanent tenant. He says to his daughter “I was married to death and had no time for anything else” – she asks if he meant Nina or the war. But he doesn’t reply. Israelism emerges in Kaniuk’s work as the “fight for life as the attainment of death.”

Another constant in the story is theshouldering ofthe unspeakable guilt by the younger generation. Almost all the sons and daughters in the novel are failures: the young soldier dies an innocent death; his brother, Noam, “sat in a crate full of nails for three weeks until [he] was bent out of shape, just so the army would reject [him] later as a psycho”. He ends up a junkie who rummages through rubbish bins for food.

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38 Kaniuk, *His Daughter* 76.


40 Kaniuk, *His Daughter* 33.
Miriam strove to follow in her fathers’ glorious footsteps and chose a military career. Although inadvertently she perpetuates her father’s melancholy. In her eyes, Rieger sees two thousand years of suffering. Their neighbour, eccentric Madame Frau, believes that Miriam is death’s bride. In a letter to her father, Miriam writes:

You never hit or punished or shamed me; you gave me everything. But maybe that was your way to avoid offering me something deeper, which comes with beatings and insults and kisses. I never understood your code language or what you really wanted. You always confused me. I got the message that all you cared about was order, not explanations. You were a man with a closed mind...it was easier for you to be a decent father than a real one.\(^{41}\)

She proceeds, “Long before I was born, you concocted a daughter for yourself.”\(^{42}\) She then concludes by delivering what she believes was his recipe:

Ten milligrams of Jewish suffering, ten milligrams of Israeli pain, ten milligrams of fire, a pinch of Mandate police units and Palmach, a heap of Hannah and her seven sons, a teaspoon of youth movements, as much of the Warsaw Ghetto as possible, at least a Whole kilo.\(^{43}\)

Rieger’s manner of fatherhood was carried out with toughness and severity. As though playing the role of military officer with his daughter, he could never show any sign of weakness, or of fear. The cost of this distanced form of fathering is his daughter’s morbidity, and eventual death, or as phrased by Yudkin, her “inevitable...cascading into the arms of death.”\(^{44}\) The fact that he was a soldier could not protect his daughter’s life. Ultimately, he caused her death.

As part of the search for his daughter, Rieger attempts to recapture his youth in the old north of Tel Aviv, together with his friends from that time. He reunites with the Chief of Staff of the Israeli military (who remains nameless), and the head of the Secret Police, Ronen. Friends since their school days and throughout military service, Moked calls them the ‘three musketeers’ of the IDF in the

\(^{41}\) Kaniuk, His Daughter 163.

\(^{42}\) Kaniuk, His Daughter 163.

\(^{43}\) Kaniuk, His Daughter 164.

\(^{44}\) Yudkin, “Heroism Disintegrated,” 94.
1950s. Israeli martial culture personified, Rieger and his two friends are modelled upon the likes of Ariel Sharon and Moshe Dayan, the military leaders of the time of the publication of the novel. From this image of masculinity Kaniuk develops a grim synthesis of Palmach identity. Rieger “discovers he knows nothing of his life,” comments Kaniuk in an interview, “there is a strong feeling of having missed the mark. It is always too early or too late.”

The three Palmach men melded in their Palmach youth into one public image. Upon separation these men discovered they had neither a solid identity nor sufficient experience to pick up the pieces and reform, decades after the glorious experience of 1948, in order to find their abandoned offspring. This process exposes the gaps between the ideal and the real, the dreamed and the lived, bringing to the fore “the missed opportunities of Zionism.” One is struck by the words of Yigal Tumarkin, Kaniuk’s peer:

Kaniuk hurts the dream of our generation and its breaking point. As one of his generation I find in his descriptions things that remind me of the dreams I dreamt and the hopes I wished to realise, the things that were possible and today are not, the mirage of the generation of the State – to be different, a bit better, honest, fair, building their houses and environment with their own hands. However, from the reality not even nostalgia is left, only a tormented sobering, a hangover followed not by a dream but by a headache and continuous depression, and that same ideal that was yesterday so clear is not even a yearning but a Tel-Avivian dream of a mirage.

The guidelines of masculinity and fatherhood as internalised by Rieger negate any possibility of experiencing love – neither with his wife, nor with his daughter. He represents a type of collective fatherhood, and therefore Miriam is an innocent victim of an ongoing condition. Rieger is a fake hero, a tragic failure as a man, a father, and a general. Rieger and his family relationships, all

modelled upon Palmach gender models are free of any real presence and commitment. All categories lack any real personal identity. They exist within a fragmented collective anchored in a fading mirage: 1948.

_Silence Amongst Men: Amos Oz’s “The Trappist Monastery”_

Amos Oz was born in Jerusalem in 1939. His first short stories were published in the early 1950s. Since 1967 Oz has published critical non-fiction concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict, and is one of the founders of the “Peace Now” movement. Leon Yudkin has said that in the works of Oz, “the cliché of Israeli society is not left unchallenged as its pathology is exposed to the exploratory probing of a restless pen.”50 In the collection _Where the Jackals Howl (Be'Artsot Hatan)_ (1965), in which “The Trappist Monastery” (_Minzar Hashatkanim_) (1962) appeared, Oz explores some of the contradictions of Israeli life: “the clash between avowed motives and real behaviour, between the inner world of the individual and his social self, between domesticated man and his innate bestiality.”51

“The Trappist Monastery” begins with a raid on a Jordanian village, occupied by an IDF regiment in retaliation against Jordanian provocations. The story tells of Itchek, one of the soldiers of the battalion, and Nachum Hirsch, a medical orderly. Itchek is initially presented as the main hero of the story and the battalion. While he is off participating in the attack on the village, Hirsch has sex with Itchek’s girlfriend, Bruria, back at the base. Upon returning from the raid, Hirsch tells Itchek that Bruria left the base with another man, and the two leave towards Jerusalem to find her. Driving at night towards the city, the jeep fails at the feet of the Trappist Monastery at Latrun, where the monks have taken a vow of silence. The two men are stranded, about to make their way by foot the nearest village.

The two characters of Itchek and Hirsch present two polar opposites, two formulations of masculinity. Itchek is presented as a hero, almost a god. He is

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51 Baruch Hochman, "Amos Oz - Where the Jackals Howled," _Midstream_ xvii.9 (1972) 64.
referred to as a "king" with "bear-like arms," and at one point in the story Hirsch looks at him and is reminded of the prophet Elijah, "wild and jealous, slaughtering the prophets of Baal on the slopes of Carmel." Itcheh, writes Oz,

> let his beard grow wild. The hair on his head was thick and matted and seemed always to be full of dust. His beard began at his temples and almost met his thick eyebrows, flowing down over his cheeks and neck and merging without a break into the bear’s fur that covered his chest and arms and perhaps the whole of his body.

Hirsch, on the other hand, is described as an anti-hero from the onset. Oz writes that the medical orderly was -

> forever scratching his cheeks; he had shaved in a hurry and his skin smarted with irritating little wounds. He took off his glasses, and, staring at the combat troops, made a joke that was lost on his fellow orderlies. Nahum Hirsch rephrased the joke. They still did not find it funny...They told him to shut up.

Hirsch is thin, pale and bespectacled. He is the type of character one can find in many Palmach stories, as a sort of side-kick, an inferior man who will highlight both the physical and mythical grandeur of the main protagonist, Itcheh. When the battalion is in the midst of the raid on the neighbouring village, Hirsch comes into Bruria’s room and feverishly tells her of the way her boyfriend, Itcheh, will be wounded in battle and the way Hirsch will then save him in a courageous field operation. Bruria listens in a mixture of pity and dismay. Hirsch is then transformed into an infant-like character, sobbing in her lap, as she caresses his hair like a baby’s, and pleads "relax little baby. You may put your head in my lap as long as you’re quiet and don’t talk and don’t cry anymore." Next, in a bizarre progression of events, Bruria submits to his adolescent approaches:

> The thunder of the guns tore apart Nahum’s pleading. “You’ll be the death of me,” said Bruria. She groaned and

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53 Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl* 107.

54 Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl* 97-98.

55 Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl* 92.

56 Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl* 103.
gave in. The young man streamed with sweat and his eyes rolled up. She stretched out her hands to her sides as if awaiting crucifixion and said, "At least get it over with quickly." As it turned out, these words were not necessary.\(^{57}\)

Itchah on the other hand taunts Bruria, pinches her, and she says 'stop that, you're disgusting', but this apparently is part of their innuendo, and Oz writes "these words always came from her lips warm and moist, as if she were really saying 'more, more!'"\(^{58}\). He insults her publicly, scolding her and telling her to leave him alone. He tells her to "stop running after him all day, and come to him only at night"\(^{59}\); he flings up her skirt and shoves his hand down her blouse. The two men and their treatment of Bruria embody two extremes of sexual behaviour, although both are imbued with erotic nervousness and an inability to express or achieve true intimacy.

Itchah’s character nonetheless appears, at first, to conform to the typical guidelines of a Zionist hero. Gershon Shaked states that "The Trappist Monastery" features the most precious figure of the Zionist establishment, who is "unable and unwilling to pass the tests of manliness and heroism"\(^{60}\) to which he is subjected. However, upon deeper examination, Oz does not, in fact, create such a character. Itchah is not a Sabra, but was born in the Diaspora. He arrived in Israel as a child refugee, and his aspiration is to finally be released from the army so that he can become a professional soccer player and invest in the bus company. Nor is he as heroic as he is said to be; in the raid on the village, a feeble foot soldier wins the heroic praise. He is not the great womaniser: he is cuckolded. In fact, the only thing he manages to overpower is his jeep. It too, eventually breaks down. Oz has taken the typical hero of Palmach literature and moulded him to his own ends. Itchah emerges as an anti-hero.

Hirsch then occupies centre stage. As they stand beneath the towering monastery, Hirsch explains to Itchah some of the history of the monks. As he explains why and how the vow of silence came about, the power balance shifts

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\(^{57}\) Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl* 104.

\(^{58}\) Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl* 104.

\(^{59}\) Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl* 96.

\(^{60}\) Shaked, "Challenges and Question Marks, on the Political Meaning of Hebrew Fiction in the Seventies and Eighties," 21.
from the figure of the animalistic, virile Itcheh, to the figure of the intelligent, verbally aggressive Hirsch. He begins feeling empowered and accuses Itcheh of being an ignorant beast. Itcheh, in turn, becomes timid, silent, and afraid of the metaphysical world Hirsch is describing to him. This world now materialises as the monastery at the foot of which they are stranded. In the end of the story, a jackal is caught in the beam of the enemy’s searchlight. Like Itcheh, “[the jackal] froze, stunned, his hide bristling. His mangy fur quivered with mortal terror.”

And so, Itcheh, an archaic figure, a hero made obsolete by the passing of his time, is replaced by Hirsch, whom the reader perceives at first as a weakling, a ‘fledgling’ as Bruria calls him. It is Hirsch who, at the end of the story stands unscathed before the darkness of the night, and before God, peaceful and confident. Baruch Hochman writes that in the collection *Where the Jackals Howl*, Oz expresses the individual’s “radical isolation,” and presents Israeli society as “unable to adequately shelter its inhabitants from its inner predations.”

“*The Trappist Monastery*” presents the anti-hero as embodying an escape route from the inner threats that inform the lives of Israeli men.

**Collective Masculinity Through the Military Lens: Conclusion**

From a critical reading of the texts, a picture emerges of a collective male identity in crisis. This identity is in crisis because its gender boundaries have been violated by a traumatic collision with reality. In the first story, the relationship between man and woman is marked by disintegration, as the military loss of the nation parallels the man’s sexual defeat. In the second story, the author explores the relationship between a father and his daughter. This relationship too emerges as damaged by the man’s military zeal. In Oz’s story the relationship between two soldiers, each representing conflicting forms of masculinity, conveys the tragic demise of the warrior hero. The chain of events in Israel in the years 1967-1987 marked the end of an age of innocence, and these stories embody the personal aspect of this shift.

61 Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl* 115.

62 Hochman, "Amos Oz - Where the Jackals Howled," 64.
Chapter Two

Protecting the Private: The Individual in the Military Community

Events in Israel since the ‘second Intifada’ of 2002 have brought to the surface some of the issues that had been brewing in Israeli society since the eve of 1967. Some five hundred officers have now chosen to sign the Combatants Letter of January 25th of that year, refusing to serve in the occupied territories, stating that, “We, whose eyes have seen the bloody toll this occupation exacts from both sides...hereby declare that we shall not continue to fight this war of the settlements.”¹ Soldiers of all ranks in the Israeli army, albeit a minority, have now become beacons of protest through such acts of refusal, signalling a potential shift in the political stalemate. A fierce confrontation between the rhetoric of ‘securitism’ (bthonism), nationalist slogans and deep personal bonds with the victims of the war is played out in the mind, heart, and body of each soldier. Alone he must choose the path to follow. In the subsequent debates the cornerstones of Israeli nationalism have been challenged in an attempt to move beyond the deadlock. This chapter will examine the nature of these challenges.

The thesis has thus far focused on gender boundaries as subverted by the experience of being an Israeli soldier, serving the state since 1967. The analysis will now move beyond the gender paradigm onto an examination of the core myths that are the cornerstones of Israeli nationalism, and the questioning of these themes in Israeli fiction concerned with the military experience. The military experience has often been depicted as devoid of an ideological imperative, and as posing the individual within it in grave danger from internal societal forces. These authors relate to the militarisation of Israeli society from the viewpoint of the individual soldier, burdened by his duty to the collective good, which comes at the expense of his own.

The fictional works to be discussed in this chapter are A. B. Yehoshua’s “The Last Commander” (1962), Yehosha Knaz’s Heart Murmur (1986), and Yitzhak Ben-

Ner’s *Ta’atuon* (1989). These works will show a growing doubt as to the ability of individuals to cope with the burden of serving in the Israeli army. These works depict individuals as subjects of the state in a relationship that compromises individual needs in favour of collective goals. Before these may be analysed one must consider the relationship between the individual and the collective as concentrated in the Israeli military experience.

*History: The Israeli Military as an Imagined National Community*

Emerging from a wide range of disciplines, Israeli scholars now seek to highlight the gaps between the Israeli state’s rhetoric of nationalism and the burden exacted by its institutions upon society. These scholars perceive the military as an institution that ensures not only the security of the state, but also the continued existence of national solidarity. Whether individuals within society agree to the actions of the military, most Jewish Israelis would agree upon the absolute necessity of universal conscription in Israel, the dissolution of which is perceived as potentially fatal to the country. There are several characteristics of the Israeli military system, and in particular the reserves system, which promote this perception. Each of the following characteristics foster national solidarity through the “partial militarisation of civilian life and a partial ‘civilianisation’ of the military.”

The first characteristic is the comparatively ‘non-military’ nature of the IDF to other national armies. The relationship between commanders and their subordinates is relatively lax. Military rituals and insignia are also less frequent in the Israeli army. Additionally, many enlisted men and women spend much of their free time in civilian surroundings, and soldiers and their families do not live in army bases as in some other countries. Lissak synthesises this idea as a relative absence of corporatism in the Israeli military structure. In other words, the Israeli military has a lesser desire to advocate its own economic interests, and does not

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3 Horowitz and Lissak, *Trouble in Utopia: The Overburdened Polity of Israel* 297.
advance one political or social approach, nor does it cultivate status symbols and social distance between ranks.4

Another important feature of the Israeli military system is the unique nature of the Israeli reserves, which differ from most other armies in their availability, readiness for immediate call-up and their oscillation between military and civilian spheres. Horowitz and Lissak write:

In contrast to most other armies, the IDF employs reservists in a wide range of military functions and at almost all levels of command. Israel’s tank corps is composed mainly of reserve units, reserve pilots are expected to take part in aerial combat, reserve officers take charge of units up to and even beyond the division level, and it is common for regular army officers to serve under commanders drawn from the reserves.5

These features combine to create permeable boundaries between the military and civilian spheres.

Ideally, military service contributes to national solidarity. This is supported by the imagined common destiny across ethnic and class groups, between unknown individuals. This bond gives rise to an ‘imagined community’6 that embodies who is an Israeli and what is meant by ‘Israeliness’. By implication, points out Sara Helman, this imagined relationship of solidarity sharpens the boundaries of society, defining by exclusion those who do not belong to the imagined community.7 Nira Yuval-Davis affirms this point by adding,

In Israel...reluctance to betray [imagined] fellow soldiers has been given by many Israelis as the main reason they continue to serve in the reserve army, despite objecting to Israel’s continuous occupation of Palestinian territories, or its invasion of Lebanon.8

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5 Horowitz and Lissak, Trouble in Utopia: The Overburdened Polity of Israel 200-01.


One soldier, himself a conscientious objector, likened the condition of exclusion from this group to becoming a tourist in Israel if he were to opt out of the army.9

On the other hand, participation in the military legitimises political dissidence in a way that a non-soldier cannot benefit from. While the external reason for compulsory participation in military service is the maintenance of Israel’s national security, military service has emerged in recent years, through studies such as Helman’s, as instrumental in the creation of a national identity necessary for civilian relations, as “the most powerful mediating mechanism between the individual and society.”10

The “routinisation of militarism in Israeli society”, to use Kimmerling’s terminology, normalises war in the lives of Israeli men and women. The Israeli reserves system is therefore a social phenomenon that shapes civilian lives. However, recent events in Israel have revealed a diminishing consensus regarding military activity in the Occupied Territories, if not elsewhere. Consequently, Israeli nationalism is also undergoing transformation. The three works chosen to illustrate the conditions described above, although written at three different times in Israeli history and fuelled by different concerns, illustrate the beginnings of awareness to the imagined nature of this community as experienced by individual soldiers.

The National Military Allegory: A. B. Yehoshua’s “The Last Commander”

A. B. Yehoshua was born in Jerusalem in 1936. After a respite in France between 1963 and 1967, Yehoshua now lives in Haifa and is professor of literature at Haifa University. Since the beginning of his career as an author in the early 1960s, numerous accolades have been bestowed upon the author, and his works are still some of the best selling in Israel. One of Yehoshua’s earliest stories, “The Last Commander” (Hamefaked Ha’Aharon) (1962), divulged to the reader the basic elements in the superficial conception of the Israeli military system and the nature of the military man. Yehoshua gradually strips these down to their barest form,

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9 Helman, “Militarism and the Construction of the Life-World of Israeli Male; the Case of the Reserves System,” 206; See also Ruth Linn, Conscience at War: The Israeli Soldier as a Moral Critic, Suny Series in Israeli Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

10 Helman, “Militarism and the Construction of the Life-World of Israeli Male; the Case of the Reserves System,” 209.
one that is devoid of any glamour, prestige, or social value. Yehoshua mimicked in “The Last Commander” the Palmach writing style (said by Oz Almog to be schematic and superficial\(^1\)), describing the collective rather than personal mode of thought of the narrator and characters. In other words, the characters of the story act as mirrors for the collective. In 1985 Yehoshua spoke of the “crumbling of the centre” in Jewish collective identity in Israel, “a dissolution of the erstwhile solidarity of Israeli national experience.”\(^12\) One of the most important ‘New Wave’ writers in Israel, Yehoshua elevated the dark, buried underside of Israeli identity to the surface and explored the ‘neurotic national existence’\(^13\) in the country.

Hillel Weiss has claimed that Yehoshua’s “The Last Commander” as well as other works by Amos Oz and S. Yizhar, all derive from shared “spiritual presumptions,”\(^14\) motivated by Jewish self-hatred. In response to this accusation, Yehoshua has stated, “I admired – and still do admire – the work of S. Yizhar. The rest I admire less.”\(^15\) In professing an attachment to one Palmach author, Yehoshua further stated that Palmach authors such as Hanoch Bartov, Natan Shaham, and Moshe Shamir, exhibited “too much solidarity with the public line, too much conformity and adherence to the prevailing national ideology...Their heroes are still shocked and disappointed by the breakdown of moral and collective values.”\(^16\) While Yizhar did, to some extent, challenge collectively sanctioned ideas, A. B. Yehoshua has gone one step further and has questioned the fundamentals of the Zionist experience, scrutinising some of the taboos of Israeli nationalism, and evoking the demons that reside beneath the Zionist meta-narrative. Although nominally a Zionist, Yehoshua has persistently probed the “dark side”\(^17\) of Zionism and his stories contain some of the most gripping anti-heroic characters of Hebrew fiction.

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\(^15\) Esther Fuchs, *Encounters with Israeli Authors* (Massachusetts: Micah Publications, 1982) 46.
\(^16\) Fuchs, *Encounters with Israeli Authors* 46.
“The Last Commander” was published in Yehoshua’s first collection, Death of the Old Man (Mot Hazaken). The characters in the collection have “ambivalent and tormented feelings about a world that is about to pass them by or has already done so with devastating consequences, complicating their last years and their relationships.”18 These stories expose their life as empty and meaningless, dominated by resignation to its futility. Two themes that dominate this collection are generational conflict and the ensuing need to purge Israelis of their past in order to survive in the modern world.19 Tiredness, an absence of creativity, apathy, and sleep, are operating motifs in the collection. Israel’s trench mentality is another element found in the collection, both in “The Last Commander” and in “The Evening Journey of Yatir.” In “The Last Commander” the reader is confronted by a loosening grip on life, and a conscious resignation to death.

The story tells of a battalion of aged soldiers, who, after years of clericalism, away from the battlefield and the glory that may be found there, are sent to the desert for a week of training. As they arrive at their destination, their commander, Yagnon, falls asleep as if in death, and cannot be woken for any significant period of time. The battalion submits to the sleepiness that has overwhelmed its leader and over seven days of idleness the camp becomes a neglected, dilapidated site. On the seventh day the High Commander (who remains nameless) gloriously enters the scene. He prompts the men into action and for an entire week the struggle between sleepiness and activity is nearly won by the latter. On the seventh day however, the High Commander departs, and the camp and its inhabitants obstinately return, unchanged, to their prior state of a rapidly eroding humanity.

The political allegory found in Yehoshua’s corpus is never too heavily concealed beneath the mimetic layer. The two commanders in the story reflect two polar opposites, which relate directly to the militarisation of Israeli society and that of individuals. The narrator emerges as a generic homo-militaris,20 a military man that is a hybrid of the two commanders, in turn representing civilian Israeli society. The narrator represents the collective, speaking in first-person plural

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19 Cohen, Voices of Israel 46.
20 Uri Shoham, The Other Meaning, from the Allegorical Parable to the Para-Realistic Story: Arter, Mendele, Peretz, Amon, A. Meqned, A. B. Yehoshua (Tel-Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Catz Institute for the Study of Hebrew Literature, 1982) 261.
throughout the story, divulging no details as to his own, individual identity. From the outset, there is no tension in this narration, and it is clear that the individual and the collective are identical. The relocation of a battalion of clerks into a military setting leads the reader to see all civilians through the military prism and signals the perception of the whole nation as an army. The boundaries between military and civilian spheres of life in Israel had thus been removed. The High Commander even refers to Yagnon as "Mister" rather than using the military title. On the third day the narrator held “rank disappeared,” the soldiers no longer bound by the protocol of military order.

The story is structured around the juxtaposition between the two commanders and their creations. Consequently, the plot oscillates between two options of existence relative to the condition of Israeli society. Each commander represents opposing forces in society - retreat and progress, defeat and attack, peace and war. The soldiers of the battalion – and by implication Israeli society – are the battleground on which the struggle ensues between these forces.

Nonetheless, both commanders emerge as obsolete. Yagnon’s name is clearly meant to evoke that of S. Y. Agnon – a great writer from the Jewish past whose influence upon Yehoshua is undeniable. Ironically, he is presented as an unattractive bachelor, a war veteran of low rank. The narrator relates:

I climbed up the hill and went over to him. This was the first time that I really saw him. He was lying at my feet – an elongated form with limbs stretched out, sporting a huge broken nose in an ugly face. With bifocals perched on his nose and a long scar deeply imprinted on his forehead. He was sleeping in a state of deep fatigue, but his breathing was barely audible...I bent over and touched him. I remember his look – tear-veiled from sleeping in the sun. If death is very close to life, then death had been caught in his eyes.

In the desert, the narrator can see the true nature of his commanding officer, now stripped of his social status, reduced to his barest form. He is ugly, almost dying, exuding only a resignation to his relocation. It is as though he has gone

\footnote{Sadan-Loebenstein, A. B. Yehoshua 147.}

\footnote{Shoham, The Other Meaning, from the Allegorical Parable to the Para-Realistic Story: Arter, Mendele, Peretz, Agnon, A. Megged, A. B. Yehoshua 267.}


\footnote{Yehoshua, The Continuing Silence of a Poet, Collected Stories 241.}

\footnote{Yehoshua, The Continuing Silence of a Poet, Collected Stories 238.}
atop the hill to die. The narrator describes him as though he is already dead. The commander drives the campsite to dereliction. Reversing the seven days of God’s creation, the seven days of Yagnon’s reign bring about the steady death of all that was once alive. The action-plan papers fly away in the hot wind, the wireless radio and the jeep break down, the soldiers darken in the sun. Their connection with life diminishes, their “human image faded.” They are now the dead heroes of the past, just as their commander is. The narrator continues, “nobody is looking for us, nobody ever gets up here,” while elsewhere he states –

For seven days we have been captives in this realm in the power of this skinny magician who can’t get enough sleep. But there is a kind of bewitching delight in having leaden legs that keep getting entangled, in the waning consciousness.

Yagnon, a man who presumably fought in the war of 1948, once a symbol of Israel’s great military prowess, has now become an evil tempter that lures his soldiers into an abyss of nothingness. He has sapped his soldiers of their energy, of their need and ability to remain connected to their ideals and their beliefs, and has led them into death.

The second chapter introduces the High Commander, who descends from the sky:

We were lost in reverie when suddenly we heard a faint rumbling sound over our heads. We lifted our eyes. In the white expanse of brightness a grey dot fluttered over us. We rubbed our eyes, when a roaring, bellowing helicopter in a whirlpool of dust and wind hovered like a bird over the furrow in the earth. Suddenly its flight was arrested in mid-air, a rope ladder unfurled, bags were thrown out, a sturdy figure descended and waved a hand to the pilots who were disappearing in flight like blue angels.

The God-like High Commander, with his silvery hair and sturdy frame, gazes at the camp and its decrepit inhabitants. They look back at him, knowing, “that was our enemy.” Although he had never fought in Israel’s wars, he is of high rank and his name evokes respect and glory. In an attempt to reverse that which had been destroyed by Yagnon, the High Commander prompts the men into action. His

enthusiasm for the re-militarisation of the slumbering soldiers and their landscape is shown cynically as war games; the description of the High Commander, who is described as "a self-made company commander, he does not sleep on the first night – 'all night the lamp glowed next to him and from behind the canvas of the tent his outline was silhouetted devising schemes and bent over plans.' While experience fills Yagnon with the desire to sleep and die, inexperience imbues the High Commander with the obsession to rule and militarise. However, within the time and space of the desert setting of the story, the High Commander's activism is rendered futile. The seven days of activity are erased in the vacuum of the desert, traceless and absurd. Minutes after the High Commander departs the now orderly camp, it returns to its former state:

Without a word, each man turned full circle. We unloaded the packs, we threw down the arms. We threw away the crates of ammunition. Quietly, on tiptoe, like someone walking with the fear of God, light-footed and intoxicated with the light. Spellbound we made our way to the kitchen tent and threw it to the ground, someone kicked the lamp until it fell apart. The toilets that we had put up were smashed in a twinkling, the tins were flying in the air. Two tackled the deserted flagpole and broke it in two. Everything returned to its former state, and before much time had elapsed, we were again sprawled out inside the furrow, exposed to the morning light, to the growing heat of the sun rays.

Thus the soldiers return to death. Confronted by two options of existence in a militarised world, both of which emerge as futile and lifeless, the group of soldiers opts to exist amorphously, aimlessly, given to the elements of the desert in self abandon. The soldiers are devoid of any inner guide that may dictate what action they should take. Any slight attempt in the story to resist the power of their superiors ends in resignation to their authority. The two commanders emerge as the "twin masks of God," as implied by biblical motifs such as the seven days of creation/destruction, and the High Commander's glorious descent from the sky. Yagnon is devoted to peace and the High Commander is devoted to war, although both options eventuate in nihilistic abandon. This mythic element elevates the

31 Sadan-Loebenstein, A. B. Yehoshua 132.
33 Yehoshua, The Continuing Silence of a Poet, Collected Stories 245.
35 Cohen, Voices of Israel 54.
story to a higher level, casting a shadow over the nature of humanity, not only Israeli society.

Even though Yehoshua wrote this story prior to the 1967 war, the author had already identified the seeds of a crumbling conscience in Israeli society, an acquiescence to the erosion of a firm, internal moral guide. The military experience for Yehoshua is one of anti-heroism, as war leads to death, rather than life. The soldiers’ journey into the desert becomes an absurd venture fuelled by the founding myths of Israel. Yehoshua’s ironic inversion of these myths and archetypes creates a sense of indeterminacy, manifested in “the swift changes in the state of mind of the Israeli protagonist, in the oscillation from a siege mentality to the euphoria of victory.”

The Military Rite of Passage: Yehoshua Kenaz’s ‘Heart Murmur’

Yehoshua Kenaz’s oeuvre contains a broad spectrum of anti-heroic responses to the collapse of heroic Israel. Although his writing began in the 1960s Kenaz gained critical acclaim with works like Musical Moment (Moment Musikai) (1980), Heart Murmur (Hitganvut Yehidim) (1986) and The Great Woman from the Dreams (Ha’Isha Hagdola Min Hahalomot) (1987). His writing features a crumbling world filled with madness and destruction. In Heart Murmur, written in the midst of the debate over Israel’s military actions in Lebanon, Yehoshua Kenaz cast his gaze to a past military experience, that of the 1950s. In contrast with the recent victory of their fathers in the War of Independence, the protagonists of the novel are most emphatically not military heroes, and through them Kenaz challenges the glory and sacrifice that imbue the military self-perception of Israel. The English title refers to the unravelling of the plot in a training base inhabited by soldiers with a low health profile.

The Hebrew title, ‘Singles Sneaking,’ refers to a military exercise held at the end of one’s training period, whereby individuals, one by one, sneak into the enemy’s domain. Successful performance of this exercise is a central feature of

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37 Ramraz-Raukh, The Arab in Israeli Literature 145.
Israeli tribal mythology and its ‘Ben-Gurionistic’ jargon.\textsuperscript{38} In this novel however, the ritual receives an alternative treatment. Instead of depicting merely the military exercise Kenaz focuses on its psychological corollaries in the soldiers’ personal growth. Through this prism, the military setting that had been charged with so much import in Israel’s founding years emerges as an alienating and destructive force in these young men’s lives. The soldiers that inhabit the novel are faced with the task of learning how to achieve peaceful coexistence in and among themselves. They must comprehend and make peace with the contradictory drives that lend each soldier his unique identity, in spite of the oppressive military setting.

The novel delivers the personal aspect of the effort to reconcile collective and individual needs, a process plagued by madness, a prevalent theme in Kenaz’s oeuvre. This is achieved by the author’s scrutiny of the social margins, enabling him to probe the unconscious social reality where urges and passions exist unchecked, as put by Gershon Shaked, and where these hidden realities are confronted by society’s inhibitions and oppressions.\textsuperscript{39} The vantage point of young men drafted into the army as unfit for combat further aids a re-examination of Israel’s combat ethos. Commenting on Israeli society through the inspection of the social margins comes to show that, according to the author, the centre no longer exists.\textsuperscript{40} Following on from the modernist works of Yaakov Shabtai, David Grossmann, and A. B. Yehoshua, Israeliness in Kenaz’s world emerges as both an object of yearning and repulsion, as he challenges the myth of collectiveness in the military setting.

Kenaz brings to life a broad cast of protagonists, each shaped and identified by his friction with the other characters. We are intimately introduced to each soldier in both his civilian and military settings. The reader relates to the existential crisis that each, in his own way, undergoes during this training period. However, the personal interaction between these men is invariably concluded in violence or muted repulsion, despite the friendships that form within the unit. Some

\textsuperscript{38} David Gurevitz, \textit{Postmodernism: Culture and Literature at the End of the 20th Century} (Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing House, 1997) 247. See also Lissak, "Paradoxes of Israeli Civil-Military Relations: An Introduction"


\textsuperscript{40} Hanna Herzig, \textit{First Name}, \textit{Essays on Jacob Shabtai, Jushua Kenaz, Yoel Hoffmann} (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1994) 78.
individuals emerge as stronger than others, although through forming intimate bonds with each soldier, the reader comes to identify the weaknesses that permeate all of the protagonists. The characters represent a broad spectrum of existential modes, and below is an exposition of each.

One of these soldiers is Alon, Kenaz’s rendering of the archetypical male hero, the ‘New Man’ that has not yet retired from the Hebrew literary canon. A kibbutz member, Alon carries a faded photograph of his father, a constant reminder of his brave death in battle in 1948. The only member of the unit enthusiastic about his military service, Alon is an avid believer in ‘beautiful Israel’ and the importance of its army, which he says “is our only hope.” He tells the narrator –

“The war continues all the time,” said Alon, “but fewer and fewer people wish to fight. The country’s problems haven’t changed, its dreams haven’t changed. Only today people prefer to make a career, live comfortably, earn money. Let others do the dirty work, let others spill their blood.”

Elsewhere Alon bemoans the ruin of his beloved country,

What a beautiful nation was here. What things they erected here. Now everything is in reverse. Soon there will be nothing left of what once was. Even Hebrew won’t be what it was. In a few years children will no longer understand the Hebrew of the bible. People will not be able to read Alterman and Yizhar. They will speak in a new language, an ugly language...Everything that was built here, all the blood that was spilt, all the suffering and disease and hunger, so as to build a new nation, to build a new country, all will be in vain? This alienation, the madness, the egoism...”

Kenaz presents this Zionist archetype under new light. He appears here not as a heroic figure, but as mocked, isolated and alienated by his fellow soldiers and military superiors. He embodies ideals for which, ironically, there is no room in the military setting and therefore in Israeli society at large. Even in the kibbutz Alon is considered maladjusted, a “weirdo.” His character emerges time and time again in a struggle to sustain disintegrating ideologies, believing he can overcome his physical weakness and be promoted to a combat unit. He eventually decides to become a section commander in this base, despite being the object of his own

41 Joshua Kenaz, Heart Murmur (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1986) 95. All translations by the author.
42 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 409.
43 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 555-56.
44 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 410.
section commander’s abuse and humiliation. Tragically, Alon is defeated in the struggle with his own fate, and commits suicide at the end of his training.

Seeds to Alon’s impending failure are planted in advance. One weekend he volunteers to remain at the base instead of going home. Alone at the base, he is struck with doubt:

Why did I stay here alone on holiday? Alone in this empty, sad shack?...Instead of contending with the problem, I escaped from it, escaped here, to this setting, the setting of an army, of toy soldiers...How long can this go on? The show must end one day. And the worst thing is, that I sometimes begin to believe these lies, these hopes.45

Rather than a fighting hero, Alon is a tragic Don Quixote,46 stubbornly adhering to faded notions of heroism and social idealism in a place and time when they have become anachronistic. These ideals lead him to madness, isolation, and eventually, death. Alon’s character is a negative stereotype against which his peers, the supposed anti-heroes in his own nationalist narrative, are positively illuminated.

One such peer is Yosi Ressler, a disconnected, introverted individual absorbed by his own artistic experience. Never participating in the heated debates that fill the idle hours of the unit’s training period, Yosi invariably retreats to his guitar and plays the soft tunes of bygone European classics. The isolation that art necessitates in the military setting, and by inference civilian life in Israel, are Yosi’s way of avoiding the disharmonic reality with which he is confronted. He relates,

I suffer here terribly. After all you can get used to the physical suffering, these crazy runs, the abuse, but you can’t pass through all this rubbish and remain clean. I try not to see too much, not to get to know too many guys, not to hear the nonsense spoken here, not to get close to all the dirt.47

Art is Yosi’s way of seeking the inner harmony that he can only then share with himself. While Alon muted his artistic tendencies for the sake of the army, Yosi

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45 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 250-51.
46 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 513, 542; see also Herzig, First Name 78.
47 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 130.
believes that music is the language in which the soul converses with itself. This is his chosen form of communication in the military setting.

Avner, who comes from a poor religious family and who cares little for his military duties, breaks Yosi’s guitar, prompting Hana Herzig to claim he is an anti-artist silencing Yosi’s voice. Thrusting himself upon life with all its ugliness and beauty, and somewhat anarchically letting go of any inner code of operation, Avner is exhilarated and frustrated by conflicting emotions and drives, and says –

It is something deep in my shitty destiny. It’s the appetite for life. I have such a big appetite for life and perhaps the world cannot sate such an appetite. That’s why I fall over and over again...I don’t know what it is, actually. It’s like a thirst. A thirst you cannot quench, and all my life I will probably run like a madman in search of something to break this thirst. It’s a huge thirst for love, for friendship, for feeling. If I don’t break it, it will break me. And that’s probably what will happen. Once I thought that everyone feels like me, at least at our age, when we’re strong and enter real life, men’s life. But more and more I discover that the majority live according to what they have. Adjusting their thirst to the amount of water in their glass. Limiting their ambitions, limiting their will according to what they can have. And I don’t know the flavour of quenched thirst, only the thirst itself.

The narration of the novel alternates between an omniscient narrator to the character of Melabes. The latter oscillates between the various options of existence represented by the other men. Also a variation on the image of the artist, as he plays the violin, Melabes feels both attraction and repulsion towards his fellow soldiers and their attitudes to life. He is the eternal voyeur, afraid of the violence that infiltrates intimate moments between his fellow men. At the beginning of his training period, he relates,

The conversation tightened, barriers came down, the voices rose and I did not want to talk with any of them...I did not want to be a part of them. My inner voice told me the test will be hard and I must limit my contact with the outside as much as I can, to shrink down and retreat into myself, like those animals that match their colour with that of their surroundings, making no unintended movement, so as not to

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48 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 277.
49 Herzig, First Name 80.
50 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 153-54.
stand out, roll up into a ball to reduce the surface of possible damage to their body.\footnote{Kenaz, \textit{Heart Murmur} 12.}

Melabes tells the reader very little about himself. Although we gather from his nickname he comes from Petah-Tikva, we do not know his real name. He is repelled by Avner, feeling threatened by his inconsistent personality and his wealth of emotion, and is discomforted by the closeness imposed by friendship with him. He questions Avner, “where is your boundary between a beautiful friendly involvement and an ugly disturbance of your private mysteries?” to which Avner replies with disappointment, “a real friend should know, should feel it.”\footnote{Kenaz, \textit{Heart Murmur} 214.}

Melabes’ training period in the military forces him to come to terms with reality, upon both its beauty and ugliness. The difficult time he spends in the military environment is his coming-of-age into adult sobriety.

The protagonists of \textit{Heart Murmur} are permutations on these basic existential modes, taken to further extremes of either isolation or connectedness with the national collective cause. Each character is a representative of society, psychologically, ideologically, and ethnically; each is analogous to one of the many faces of Israeli identity.\footnote{Herzig, \textit{First Name} 77.} These aspects are in a constant dialogue with each other through the protagonists’ interactions. The characters range from displaying values of individuality and self-preservation, to a complete and unquestioning devotion to the collective, and a willingness to sacrifice everything for its survival. The latter characters, such as Alon, are the ones condemned to failure according to the author’s narrative. This group picture reflects the pressure of the collective imperative in the life of a young nation, writes David Gurevitz.\footnote{Gurevitz, \textit{Postmodernism: Culture and Literature at the End of the 20th Century} 247.}

Kenaz challenges this imperative by questioning the viability of the great hero of the Israeli military narrative. He achieves this by condemning its most precious icon, Alon, to failure.

The military is a realm of endless humiliation, abuse,

more futile torment to the last drop of air left in one’s lungs, to the edge of forgetfulness, to the edge of one’s breaking point. There is no limit to their power of invention, so
intimate is their familiarity with the power of fear and their ability to operate it.\textsuperscript{55}

The higher-ranking officers at the base are abusive, power hungry, tainted by corruption. One soldier says that in them he can see "how power creates evil."\textsuperscript{56} As the section commander tells Alon, "An instructor in a trainees base has a power that few other commanders have in other units. You control people, you can play with their lives as you will, you can determine their destiny."\textsuperscript{57} Avraham Hagorni-Green writes, "The officers, despite showing traces of humanity, are a constant threat. Unexpected. Suspected of malicious intent. Ready to surprise. To discover vulnerabilities."\textsuperscript{58} The military establishment treats the soldiers at this base as unimportant creatures that cannot participate in the defence of the nation to any significant extent, due to their low health profile. It thus permits their escape to their inner self and private meanderings. However, one must consider that the military superiors are those same characters that are now in training, a projection of the possible military future of Alon, Avner, Yosi, and the others.

The image of the group collective in Kenaz’s fiction emerges as superficial, inhumane and impossible. Hanna Herzig goes so far as to say that being together, living collectively, entails being part of a power structure of evil, madness, impurity and shame, with only a cosmetic sense of order and harmony.\textsuperscript{59} The characters struggle to preserve their humanity in an environment that leads to the blurring of their unique personality outlines. Kenaz questions whether it is possible to preserve such humanity through finding a common social denominator between the widely differing men in the military community. The war these men fight is one of individual survival, and collective identity becomes a tightening noose around the neck of each soldier, solitude proving the only escape from its strain.\textsuperscript{60}

Sub-plots of betrayal propel the story, as each character is betrayed or betrays someone else at some point in the novel. After an argument between two soldiers becomes heated, they beat up a bystander who has been repeatedly

\textsuperscript{55} Kenaz, \textit{Heart Murmur} 387.

\textsuperscript{56} Kenaz, \textit{Heart Murmur} 81.

\textsuperscript{57} Kenaz, \textit{Heart Murmur} 441.

\textsuperscript{58} Abraham Hagorni-Green, \textit{Contemporary Hebrew Narrative} (Israel: Or Am, 1989) 55.

\textsuperscript{59} Herzig, \textit{First Name} 83.

\textsuperscript{60} Shaked, \textit{Literature Then, Here and Now} 179.
picked on by the others. After the violence subsides, Avner relates with worry to Melabes,

Man, I’m humiliated...I’m terribly humiliated. When they were both beating on Ben-Hemo, instead of beating each other, suddenly I also felt like getting up and beating him to death. I barely stopped myself...I would jump him and rip him to shreds, squash him, believe me. I didn’t believe it would happen to me. Where has this hatred come from, where has this evil come from? I don’t know. But there is a lot of evil in me. And it gives me such power!...I felt like there is a murderer running around inside me and I have no control over him. And you all stand there and laugh.61

Those who do not actively perpetrate these acts of violence acquiesce to them and are thus incriminated in the process.

Yosef Oren writes that the novel’s Hebrew title thus refers not only to the military operation, but also to the individual, personal strategy of coping with exposure to the ugliness of the world and mankind. The individual, the artist, must distance himself from the collective in order to concentrate on the beautiful. He must avoid being consumed by the destructive forces of civilization, the “sticky flow.”62 He can then ‘sneak’ his own private vision to safety. Oren argues that the novel’s title connotes a deeper narrative, a metaphor for the coming of age of the artist, training him to identify beauty in a life so filled with ugliness. He writes, “Only a fool would see, in this reverse movement of the artist in relation to the direction of the collective, a kind of defection. The beauty created through this individual sneaking of the artist will contribute to and enrich the lives of all.”63

The military setting in Heart Murmur is infused with cosmetic notions of togetherness as projected by the collective Israeli perception. The community is taught to fight together as a team, and yet the novel focuses on the individual’s struggle within the group context. Kenaz contends with the difficulty of cooperating with people who are so different to each other in an environment permeated by violence and fear. The alienation they feel comes at the cost of their own identity and life. Beauty is discovered in those who at the outset embodied ugliness. It is contained in those who reject Zionism and militarism, in

61 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 118-19.
62 Kenaz, Heart Murmur 377.
63 Yosef Oren, Salute to Israeli Literature (Rishon Le-Zion: Yachad, 1991) 78.
those who focus on their own individuality and their own inner voice, rather than sacrificing it for the imagined collective.

*History: The 1987 Intifada*

A brief detour will now be taken into the historical background of Yizhak Ben-Ner’s *Ta’atuon* (1989). This relates chiefly to the impact of the Intifada upon Israeli society. In Arabic, *intifada* means literally ‘shaking off,’ and metaphorically ‘uprising.’ It became the commonly used term for the first en-masse Palestinian reaction to the occupation in 1987. The Intifada sharpened the sense of alienation and distancing on both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the mutual denial of the ‘other.’ Moshe Zuckerman adds that the Intifada finally quashed the David and Goliath myth, which posited that Israel was the weaker power.64 Further, Myron Aronoff claims that the Lebanon War and the suppression of the Intifada contributed to the undermining of the sacrosanct image of the Israeli military. He reasons that the personal experiences undergone by people serving in the occupied territories during the uprising influenced the cultural meaning they ascribed to the army.65

The first two months of the Intifada of 1987 were called “the black two months,”66 during which time the IDF fired one million bullets, according to army records.67 Soldiers stated that within this time

There was absolute uncertainty as to what was allowed and disallowed...There was a deep sense of frustration among the soldiers...they felt helpless, because they had no way of responding to the villagers’ provocations. The villagers were well aware of the orders (not to shoot)...if they throw stones...There was not a single soldier without ‘black and blue marks’ incurred by stone throwing.68


Many soldiers serving in the IDF during this time found themselves morally and militarily ill-equipped to fight this conflict. Soldiers often found themselves alone, confronted by a hostile mob, unable to shoot, having to improvise their own ways to cope with the situation. Most of those soldiers who refused to follow orders during the Intifada cited the encounter with the civilian Palestinian population as the most stressful factor of their military service. The IDF had issued a clear protocol of operations that was meant to accord with the Purity of Arms dictate, allowing use of tear gas and clubs, plastic, rubber and live bullets, at a distance no closer than seventy metres, to be fired only by officers and aimed only at legs. Military historian Martin Von Kreveld declares: “the IDF is being torn to pieces and what is left are gangs trying to protect their own lives and later remove the evidence from the media.”

*Just Stay Normal: Yitzhak Ben-Ner’s ‘Ta’atuo’*

Over a decade after the writing of “Nicole,” Ben-Ner wrote one of the most chilling works of literature created in Israel. *Ta’atuo* (1989) is a four-part novella set during the 1987 Intifada, and was written a month after its onset. The work probes the madness, isolation and violence of Israeli society, themes that had been explored previously by Yehoshua and Kenaz, but now presented in their most raw and prosaic form.

Ben-Ner’s Rashomon-style *Ta’atuo* presents the Intifada experience from four different perspectives. The Hebrew word *Ta’atua* means a mirage, an illusion. The addition of the diminutive ending onto the word adds a blackly humorous twist to the subject matter. The novel itself however, is far from humorous and provides a rude awakening to the events that both soldiers and civilians have had to reconcile daily life with since the onset of the Intifada in 1987. Such events reoccurred in 2001, calling for a re-reading of Ben-Ner’s work, more relevant than ever to life in Israel.

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69 Linn, *Conscience at War: The Israeli Soldier as a Moral Critic* 94.
70 Cited in Linn, *Conscience at War: The Israeli Soldier as a Moral Critic* 82.
The four perspectives from which we view the Intifada are those of Holi (Ahelavi) Tsidon – a nineteen year-old soldier serving in the Gaza Strip, his father Oded Tsidon, Kharul – a security serviceman acquainted with both, and Mishel Sakhtut, another nineteen year-old soldier serving in the same regiment as Holi. The four men’s stories combined provide a rounded image of the events, and the different ways those individuals have dealt with the violence they either witnessed or perpetrated. The Rashomon format of the novella reinforces the absence of truth about the events and their experience by the participating individuals. This absence reflects the uncertainty surrounding this conflict and expresses the confusion and embarrassment found in the fragmented and separated Israeli public during the first months of the uprising.72

The first episode is narrated by Holi, who delivers the story of a day in a Palestinian town. His battalion is in “some fucking city,”73 similar to that in which Ben-Ner’s own son had served.74 We witness the Israeli soldiers patrolling the streets, a standoff with Palestinian agitators, the beating of one by Holi, and the accidental death of a Palestinian boy, the company’s odd mascot, at the hands of the soldiers. The language in which this section is written has been termed by one critic as “Intifada Hebrew.”75 It represents the distorted world and the absence of beauty in the reality of its speakers. Ariel Hirschfeld argues that this vernacular reveals a hidden psychology. The references to anal sex within the soldier’s expletives reveal a hidden plot of a distorted and violent sexuality.76 The terrifying brutality, the narrator’s exclamations “just stay normal,”77 all delivered in military slang, combine to form a jarring statement about the normalisation and internalisation of violence.

As the soldiers beat up one of the Palestinian youths, Holi stands to the side and observes, “I can’t explain it. A kind of feeling of hypnosis, of some supreme

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72 Tova Raz, “‘Ta’atuon’ as Literary Testimony of the Times,” Sdomot Winter (1991) 156.
73 Yitzhak Ben-Ner, Ta’atuon (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1989) 7. All translations by the author.
77 Ben-Ner, Ta’atuon 16.
ecstasy. Stoned. Not from the fact we sort of got to avenge them, finally. Don’t think so. Don’t know why.”

Moments later, Holi is egged on to join the beating:

But I – actually it was kind of fun, I admit. Perhaps I needed that push from Etzion. I always need to be pushed a bit, or else I think that actually it is us rolling in the mud and they are the ones kicking and abusing us and it turns things around sort of – suddenly I find myself like kicking one of those guys and shouting at him, lie on your stomach, you shit. And he, young but bolding, quickly obeys and turns over onto his stomach, and tells me in whispers, sort of begging, please, please, dakhilak, and I put my foot on him and see a sort of dark mark spreading on his arse. Come on, I shout, shaking with laughter, wow, don’t know what happened to me then, maybe a kind of happiness that someone was so afraid of me, come here, Etzion: he shat his pants out of fear! And Etzion Morad stops standing on top of the stabber and I see the face of the stabber, who probably lost consciousness completely, sort of smashed, like a big iron grate ploughed it, no nose, no mouth, everything sort of red meat. And then, where we all laughed at that guy who couldn’t stop himself and, like, did his business in his pants, then I suddenly feel that I also pissed my pants. Everything I managed to stop until then was released. I don’t know what from. From tension. From inner fear. Who knows. Actually I didn’t feel fear or tension, and that. Wow. What a shame. At once I kicked the filthy water in the bath of cement, intentionally, and it all sprayed me sort of, so that they couldn’t see my shame. What happened to me, hell, what happened to me, I thought then in a terrible depression, sort of all at once. It made me really blue. Maybe, I thought, it’s a first sign that I can’t keep myself normal, like I always told myself that is the most important thing.

What is most disturbing about Holi’s narration is the absence of self-knowledge, and the ensuing eruption of unfamiliar, shameful feelings. His brutality is presented dispassionately, forcing the reader to simply witness it, as Ben-Ner leaves no room for reflection. The account gives the reader no sense of distance from or perspective on the violence. The reader, like Holi, is simply immersed in it. The reader has no choice but to submit to the events, like a puppet on strings. This amplifies the sense of detachment from the narrator and his experience.

Despite his (hopeless) attempts to remain normal, Holi develops a pathological violence, a perverted joy at the feeling of abnormality. The mixture of emotions that accompany the shock at his own ability to carry out such violence against

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78 Ben-Ner, Ta’atun 36.
79 Ben-Ner, Ta’atun 36-37.
another man eventually drives Holi out of the military base. He is placed under military arrest for refusing to shower, making himself incomunicado by the stench that he creates around himself. Leon Yudkin adds, “[Holi] insists on his personal freedom and his right of privacy, so will not wash. His isolation is thus confirmed in unmistakable terms." The stench is symbolic of guilt. As the stench becomes normalised, so too does the guilt that it symbolises.

Holi’s father, Oded Tsidon, visits him in the psychiatric hospital, and we receive his own narration of events. Oded is a doctor in a regional hospital. His wife, who had been a peace activist, was killed by a terrorist. Oded asks himself the same questions as are in the mind of the reader regarding Holi, “Why are you no longer innocent and sweet, as I would want you to be? What happened to you, my spoilt and protected little boy? How is it that I didn’t realise that there is no boundary in you between right and wrong?” Ben-Ner moves away from Holi and investigates Oded’s private life, his married lover, and his own internalisation of violence and the ensuing desensitisation to it.

As in “Nicole”, here too the political breakdown finds a parallel in the personal lives of the characters. Oded, a single man of some time, has sex with his son’s psychiatrist. After the act, she tells him nonchalantly that she must return to her husband and that the two men must meet. Oded is shocked, but resigns himself to this fate as a logical continuation to the thread of deterioration and alienation that have come to dominate his existence.

Like his son, Oded is overcome by madness. Oded and a hitchhiking reserve soldier become entrapped by a hostile mob in the same Palestinian town. After exiting the scene unscathed, Oded accidentally runs over one of the rioters –

Suddenly, like a shard of ice, you are struck with the recognition: you’ve killed someone. An odd blend of dread and delight – the dread of someone who has unnoticeably, and for the first time, crossed the red line between saving a life and taking it away; the delight of someone who has committed the most forbidden, as far as he’s concerned; that

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81 Raz, “‘Ta’atuon’ as Literary Testimony of the Times,” n.p.
83 Ben-Ner, Ta’atuon 94.
is to say: here, I too can do this terrible thing, kill a man; I have withstood the test.\textsuperscript{84}

Strangely empowered by this fear, Oded then beats the man, demanding that the armed hitchhiker shoot the Palestinian. But the man is still struggling to live, and as Oded drives him to the hospital those words he had uttered, “Shoot! Shoot!”\textsuperscript{85} remain etched in his memory. He is subsequently overtaken by a growing madness that he cannot recognise nor communicate. Tellingly, his crime goes not only unpunished, but also unnoticed. After witnessing and perpetrating this irreconcilable act, father, like son, becomes engulfed by isolation. Oded eventually disappears, his life in doubt. His disappearance marks the end of the process of the narrowing of his place in society. He is in retreat from its despairing, immoral state. Ben-Ner thus provides a civilian corollary to the military experience in the occupied territories. Even Oded – the respectable Left-leaning doctor – succumbs to the tides of violence and anomie that have washed over his country.

Harul, the silent and tough security serviceman, delivers the third narration. He addresses Oded’s wife Sarah, with whom, unbeknownst to Oded, Harul had shared a secret relationship prior to her death. Harul’s relationships are infused with a feeling that he must protect his loved ones. Because he cannot, he is eternally plagued by feelings of loss. Harul’s character connotes the Jewish pioneer. He knows all, and fights for the good of the state; he is strong as well as passionate. However, while one part of him wishes to be with his beloved Sarah, the other wishes to protect her son and husband, his best friend. His life is halved, and the two desires he carries within him cannot be coalesced. He sees himself as “a lone wolf, a stray dog running at the outskirts of the camp.”\textsuperscript{86} Sarah, the beloved woman who died a martyr’s death, has too lived a double life through her love affair. No one is freed of guilt and alienation. Even as fearless a man as Harul struggles to preserve his normalcy, emphasising, “so I stand my guard: cold. Sober. Ready for anything. Just so as to ensure a sane continuation.”\textsuperscript{87}

These chapters expose not only Harul’s affair, but also the relationship between Harul and Fauzi, a Palestinian activist who slyly evades capture. A representative of the Israeli political and military elite of the time, Harul labours

\textsuperscript{84} Ben-Ner, Ta'atuon 91.

\textsuperscript{85} Ben-Ner, Ta'atuon 91-92.

\textsuperscript{86} Ben-Ner, Ta'atuon 200.

\textsuperscript{87} Ben-Ner, Ta'atuon 203.
under the delusion that he has the ability to control the Palestinians and their lives. He believes he can pull the strings of the Intifada as though it were a puppet show. And yet his attempts lead only to failure. The relationship between Harul and Fauzi, his nemesis, comes into view as engendered by a mutual need for each other. Harul becomes obsessed with Fauzi, trailing him as though chasing his own shadow, which must be destroyed. After a long and dramatic dialogue between the two, Harul kills Fauzi, only later learning that he was a double agent. Fauzi, it transpires, has a real yet baffling connection to the Jewish world. He is perhaps even the father of a Jewish child. Harul departs the murder scene repeating hesitant, semi-apologetic murmurs to his dead lover, the feeling of loss amplified by the loss of his now questionable opponent.

Through Fauzi’s dubious ethnicity Ben-Ner infuses his work with an allegorical quality, as though questioning the boundaries between the Israeli and Palestinian identities. Inherent to this allegory is the ideological invalidity of the ongoing conflict. Ariel Hirschfeld argues that Harul’s narrative reveals the relationship between Jews and Arabs as more than mere symbiosis; rather it is a violent and ugly mutual need that ties these two national entities together. Hirschfeld posits that the embarrassment that pervades the protagonists is compounded by this knowledge: “This mutual violence has a specific...truth, much more so than the relative peace of the years of the occupation...it contains the essence of the nature of things.”
88 The Intifada, claims Hirschfeld, simply lifted the veil from the Israeli-Palestinian relationship.89 By blurring the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ through the dubious identity of Fauzi, Ben-Ner removes the last possible element of threat from the Palestinian flank, thus concentrating all the threat within Israeli society.

The catatonic Mishel Sakhtut narrates the fourth and final episode. Ben-Ner chose to deliver his perspective as a stream of consciousness that reveals the depth of isolation, despair and madness that was also manifested in the other protagonists. A young soldier from a development town having witnessed the killing of the Palestinian child, Mishel rapidly descends into a spiritual, physical and mental paralysis. He refuses, or is unable, to undergo the metamorphosis undergone by Holi, and thus becomes insane.

All four voices share the common element of losing their path and meandering through the chaos of these turbulent times in Israel. In his portrayal of their Intifada experience Ben-Ner succeeds in surpassing political difference. Of this David Avidan writes:

It would be simplistic and incorrect to perceive Ta’atuon... as an expression of Leftist protest. There are neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ and there is certainly no ‘right’ nor a condemnation of guilty parties. There is the description of a reality of a violent struggle that drags and hurts and distorts and sterilises us all.90

Ariel Hirschfeld confirms Avidan’s statement and argues that in Ta’atuon the writer has extricated himself from the Leftist stronghold.91 By avoiding the projection of his political beliefs onto the Intifada Ben-Ner shows that all participants in the struggle are defective, lost and violent. All fail to perceive the direness of the situation in which they are stranded.

Ben-Ner’s novella unveils the all-encompassing mental erosion that is eating through the fabric of Israeli society. Everyone knows each other, the locations criss-cross, the story is replete with love triangles, thus evoking the conceptual element of condensation, so typical of the Israeli experience.92 And yet the brutality continues unrecognised and unnoticed. While military experience becomes the outlet for society’s most negative of features, it is reflected in the brutality that has spread through civilian life as well. In the words of Rubik Rozental –

Ta’atuon brings with it an important message, which is that the occupation, in the short history of which the Intifada is no more than a stage, is not only corrupting, but maddening, and it distorts society and its sons, it blurs the distinction between good and evil, the permitted and the forbidden, and it completes the gradual failure of secular Zionism and its values.93

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The Message of Anti-Militarism: Conclusion

I write like a soldier
alienated from any political awareness,
and the feelings alternating during this guard shift
are wary of looking at each other.

Zeev Sternfeld, Intifada Diary (1988)

These three stories reveal different aspects of the state of Israeli identity in the face of increasing militarism. Yehoshua identified the destructive force of militarism as early as 1962, and broadened the scope of the then embryonic anti-militaristic discourse to draw parallels between militarisation and death. Kenaz explored the military unit as a mirror for Israeli society, showing that in the face of an absent stable centre, it is the fraying margins that are the core of society. The military world of Kenaz is one that unleashes the darkest desires of men, distancing individuals from each other. Kenaz also passes a severe judgement upon Palmach mythology, portraying its weakness in the face of a harsh world devoid of Zionist ideals. Ben-Ner built on this theme with his delivery of the Intifada and the way in which four individuals, both civilian and military, experience it. The military experience for Ben-Ner is not heroic, but exacts brutality upon all involved, and none depart his pages unscathed.
Chapter Three

‘Post-Zionist’ Military Fiction

In the 1980s Israeli society was entering a state of anomie, wracked by division after 1977, still bruised by the haphazard victory of 1973. This was experienced on many levels, and was informed by a growing estrangement from the Zionist code as a dictate for Israeli identity. The social, political and cultural conditions of the time gave rise to a different mode of writing. This writing was further influenced by global trends in art, philosophy, historiography and sociology. In addition, fiction began operating in unison with other media, such as cinema, television, and the Internet. The modernist ‘New Wave’ works of the intellectual elite of the Israeli Left were now being challenged by a counter trend of ‘post-Zionist’ writers. This ‘Different Wave’ in Hebrew fiction engaged with the changing face of Israeli society from a position that no longer accepted Zionist mores, and looked elsewhere for a resolution to its plight. Here, no cow is too holy, and nothing escapes the gaze of this fracturing vision. This chapter will focus on ‘post-Zionism’ and postmodernism in Israel and the way these emerging critiques contend with the unwavering presence of the military. And while ‘post-Zionism’ and postmodernism are impossible to define unequivocally, it is worth remembering that Zionism and modernism were also contested terms. The fact that the meaning of post-Zionism is not a settled entity should not stop us from exploring its implications.

This chapter will open with an exploration of the sociological and historical context of Israel since the 1980s in order to illustrate the diminishing hegemony of Zionism. This analysis will be followed by an examination of the literary shift from modern to postmodern fiction, and the analysis of the works of two Israeli writers. Etgar Keret’s acclaimed collection Pipelines will be scrutinised, followed by an analysis of Yitzhak Laor’s first novel, The People, Food Fit for a King. These works have surpassed the anti-militarism of the fiction analysed thus far, deflating the central values which underlie its attempts to comprehend the Israeli condition.

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1 Avraham Balaban, A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction, Postmodernist Israeli Fiction (Tel Aviv: Ketter Publishers, 1995).
History: Social and Political Shifts 1980-2003

The gradual undermining of Zionism in Israel is a process that cannot be related to one specific event. However, there were several critical and transformative events that cannot be overlooked. The 1980s were straddled by two wars towards which there was never a national consensus. The political debate surrounding these wars impacted all areas of life in Israel. The 1982 war and the events of Sabra and Shatila\(^2\) subverted “the self-image of the Zionist occupying the victim position,” according to Adi Ofir, “and has come to reflect the end of Zionism.”\(^3\)

Zuckerman lists these fractures in the Israeli consensus: from growing public protest against military action in Lebanon in 1982, to the ultimate quashing of the David and Goliath myth with the Intifada in 1987. Subsequently, the 1991 Gulf War met with little consensus in the Israeli public. The Oslo negotiations of 1992 saw an incoherent Israeli side, plagued by internal conflict. Exemplary of this tension is the possibility of radical settlers responding violently to Israeli soldiers dismantling their settlements. The Left’s rise to power again in 1992 and the ensuing peace process contributed to a false sense of national security and safety. The external threat which had for years fortified the security imperative in Israeli consciousness, and which played a crucial role in the pacification of internal conflicts, began losing some of its uniting power. While the fear of terrorism persisted, the mythology that underpinned the fear of constant threat had receded.

Another event that illustrates the inner conflicts of Israeli society was the killing of thirty men in a Hebron mosque at the hands of a Jewish member of Gush Emunim in February 1994. The Israeli government rapidly condemned the massacre, although the man’s grave became a shrine for his many followers. What ensued was a struggle between the Supreme Court and the settler community, which led to violence between Israeli civilians and Israeli military

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\(^2\) In September 1987 Israeli troops allowed Lebanese Christian militia to enter Sabra and Shatila, two Beirut-area Palestinian refugee camps under Israeli military control. The militia then went on a killing spree. Estimates of the death toll ranged from 460 to 800 fatalities. This event prompted mass protest in Israel and triggered the dismissal of Israeli Defence Minister Ariel Sharon and Israel’s Chief of Staff, General Rafi Eitan.

forces. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 expressed most profoundly the fundamental anomalies arguably inherent to Israel. Rabin, perceived by the Right as betraying Zionism, was replaced not by his heir, Shimon Peres, in the 1996 elections, but by his opponent Binyamin Netanyahu in a majority rejection of the steps Rabin had taken towards peace.⁴

Tom Segev observed in 2002, “Most people feel that the existence of the State of Israel is no longer in question – that Israel is not going to be destroyed. So now it is possible to create a society that is no longer focused on saving the Jewish people. This is a post-Zionist situation.”⁵ The ground was ripe for the emergence of counter-narratives to Zionism. This period saw the publication of highly controversial revisionist studies of history and sociology, such as Simcha Flapan’s *The Birth of Israel* (1987), Benny Morris’ *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (1987), Ilan Pappe’s *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: 1947-1951* (1992), and Uri Ram’s *The Changing Agenda of Israeli Sociology* (1995), most of which still occupy a contentious position in public and academic debate in Israel and abroad. Pappe writes, “the debate has not attracted anyone beyond the ‘chattering and writing classes’ of Israeli society; it is an elitist exercise, albeit with wide implications for the society as a whole”⁶ much as post-colonialism exists in Australia or America. Nonetheless, this tension has infiltrated the arts and mainstream media in Israel in ways that have not yet been recognised.

In 1995 Uri Ram wrote that the 1980s witnessed, “the homogeneous and harmonious image of Israeli society...being tarnished with blotsches of growing heterogeneity and discord,” and that Israeli society was now perceived as “more of a boiling pot than a melting pot.”⁷ Eric Cohen wrote in the same year, “Although many Israeli Jews remain nominal Zionists, Zionism has become largely irrelevant as an ideological context for their opinions and actions with regard to the most burning dilemmas that Israel faces. Nevertheless,” he continues, “even if Zionism has lost much of its practical relevance for many

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people, few would openly admit that they have ceased to be Zionists. Such an admission indeed would be widely considered as close to treason or sacrilege.”

In response to these claims several Zionist counter-narratives have emerged, which emphasise Jewish self-hatred as a thematic axis around which anti or post Zionist opinions are spawned (often no distinction between the two positions is made). Such is Yoram Hazony’s *The Jewish State* (2000), which draws an image of continuous derision of the ‘beautiful Israel’ in favour of “a systematic attack from its own cultural and intellectual establishment” by countless members of Israeli academia and the literary arena. Hazony states:

> In my view, it is these establishment cultural figures [Eliezer Schweid, Amnon Rubinstein, A. B. Yehoshua etc.], even more than the circles of self-professed post-Zionists, who are today paving the way to the ruin of everything Herzl and the other leading Zionists sought to achieve. Indeed, they are pushing us toward the dismantling of Israel’s character as a Jewish state.10

Another participant in the debates is Efraim Karsh, claiming in *Fabricating Israeli History* (1999) that Benny Morris intentionally distorted the documents that informed his controversial study. Karsh proceeds to project such judgement onto the remaining ‘New’ or revisionist historians, stating:

> In this inverted Orwellian world, where war is peace and crime is justice, not only are the distorters of history not denounced from the research community, but are praised.

> This is indeed the main reason that drives the ‘New Historians’ – beyond their personal individual reasons...Jewish self-hatred.11

As mentioned in the introduction, the 1990s in Israel were a time of rapid demographic change with the influx of nearly one million Jews from the former Soviet Union, and the arrival of foreign workers from Europe, Asia and Africa to replace the diminishing Palestinian workforce. This followed the mass migrations of Ethiopian Jews to Israel in the 1980s. After the completion of their obligatory military service entire generations of Israelis began looking to Thailand and India for spiritual awakening, rather than towards the desert or the golden Jerusalem hills, as had their forebears. One study found Israeli

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10 Hazony, *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel’s Soul* xxvii.

11 Efraim Karsh, *Fabricating Israeli History, the "New Historians"* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999) 11.
students adhered to a liberal version of nationalism, considering national affiliation a matter of choice rather than birth – “they did not associate their citizenship with Zionism or Judaism, and were willing to accept Arabs and other non Jews as equal citizens.”12

**History: Steps towards Demilitarisation**

In what ways did these changes affect the perception of the Israeli Defence Forces in Israel? Since the 1982 war, several groups of conscientious objectors have emerged in Israel. The first, 'There is a Limit' (Yesh Gvul), established during that war, accumulated some 3,000 signatures for its petition to the Israeli government. The petition stated:

> We have sworn to protect the safety and security of the State of Israel. We are faithful to this pledge. Therefore we turn to you to enable us to fulfil our reserve duty within the boundaries of the State of Israel and not on Lebanese soil.13

![Picture 1: Israeli soldiers demonstrating outside the Defence Ministry, 1982](image)

These ‘refuseniks,’ all of whom were reserve soldiers, did not object to military service in Israel per se, but rather advocated selective refusal. Their protest was based on a democratic approach to the actions demanded of each soldier. Since that time other groups have emerged in Israel advocating the right to refuse, such as *The Shministim*, high school graduates, stating in their protest letter to the Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon in 2001:

> As youth about to be called to serve in the military we pledge to do all that we see fit so as not to serve the occupation. Some of us will refuse to serve beyond the green line, others will avoid military service in other ways - we view all these means as legitimate and

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necessary, and we call on other youth, conscripts, soldiers in the standing army, and reserve service soldiers to do the same.\textsuperscript{14} Simultaneously, the organisation \textit{The Courage to Refuse} reacted to the outbreak of the second Intifada with an ideological platform that fostered Zionist ideology while refusing to perpetuate the occupation.\textsuperscript{15} More groups continue to emerge in Israel in support of this trend.\textsuperscript{16}

Other military infringements on civilian life ceased to be accepted as inevitable and justified. Bilu and Wiztum state that:

\begin{quote}
The power of the state as a hegemonic agent for instilling collectivist values...need not be underestimated even in this 'post-Zionist' era, but the Lebanon War and the subsequent fighting during the Intifada have been so controversial as to detract from the national urge for heroic commemoration [of military death].\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

By inference, the overall sacrosanct nature of Israeli militarism diminished as well. Bilu and Wiztum further posit:

\begin{quote}
The state is still a dominant agent of memory and the warrior ethos still retains much of its glorious patina. But the landscapes of memory have become more plural and variegated as personal experiences of war-related suffering incompatible with the warrior ethos...have been articulated.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

The eroded influence of nationalist rhetoric on Israeli soldiers is expressed by the incompatibility or dissonance between the soldiers’ civil values and their military experience.


\textsuperscript{18} Bilu and Wiztum, "War-Related Loss and Suffering in Israeli Society: An Historical Perspective" 25.
Literature: Postmodernism and Deconstruction in the 1980s and 1990s

Each generation, writes Gadi Taub, offers new modes of expression, sometimes in the form of moderate change from preceding representations, other times in a rebellious way propelled by a rejection of the past. Such, for instance, was the transition from European Jewish literature to the Sabra canon and from Palmach literature to the ‘New Wave’ fiction of Yehoshua and Oz, discussed in the first and second chapters. The authors Balaban and Gurevitz group with the ‘Different Wave’ in Israeli literature – Yoel Hoffmann, Orly Kastel-Blum, Itamar Levi, Etgar Keret, Dorit Peleg, Avraham Heffner, Yuval Shimoni, Yitzhak Laor – are not a homogeneous group, nor do they constitute a monolithic literary trend. Adia Mendelssohn-Maoz adds Tsruya Shalev, Orfa Riesenfeld, Ilana Bernstein, Gadi Taub and Uzi Veil to this list.19 Coming from different generations and artistic backgrounds, these writers respond to a world that is different not only to the Palmach generations’, but more significantly, to the reality of the ‘New Wave’ as well.

The transition from ‘New Wave’ or modernist fiction to ‘Different Wave’ fiction oriented in ‘post-Zionism’ is characterised by several stylistic features examined by Balaban. The narrating voice shifted from an omniscient one to a narrator whose perspective is emphatically narrow, subjective, and limited.20 The speaking voice is often more fluid, not attached to one character but transcending such previously accepted limitations. Our understanding of the texts cannot be constrained to the intentions of particular authors, but is informed by the social and cultural constructs out of which they arise. ‘Different Wave’ authors thus allow the text to “challenge its own boundaries,”21 by incorporating ambiguities regarding narration and authorship into their fiction.

The second aspect of change in Different Wave fiction concerns the character’s inner world, stripped of any national, representational capacity. The main protagonists do not fit into the outlines of the native male hero of Yizhar and Shamir. Nor are they akin to the modern heroes of Oz and Yehoshua,


20 Balaban, A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction 50.

21 Yerach Gover, Zionism, the Limits of Moral Discourse in Israeli Hebrew Fiction (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 9.
“shooting and crying,” undergoing ideological crises in the face of a hostile reality.

The fiction of these writers presents a highly dubious world that does not necessarily correspond to norms of reality. These authors emphasise the fragmented nature of the world and favour discontinuity over unquestioning acceptance of social norms. The structure of the narrative privileges ambiguity and evokes the decentered and dehumanised individual. While the world depicted in ‘New Wave’ works is lamentably fragmented, the ‘post-Zionist’ authors of the ‘Different Wave’ celebrate this fragmentation. These writers use lean language. They refrain from lyrical expression, preferring lingual mimicry or borrowed lingual forms. Gurevitz posits that “The reproduced and modular language in which they [write] emphasises its untenable and ridiculous nature. It is no longer able to represent some identifiable real or allegorical world.” Language in these works is often self-reflexive, and is used to highlight its own superficiality and futility.

Representation of the military in this different fiction has waned, given the move away from the army as a glorious rite-of-passage for Israeli maturation and nationalisation. Ilan Pappe claims that Israeli fiction seldom engages overtly with the ideas of ‘post-Zionist’ historians. He writes, “Very few prose writers have crossed the consensual lines or have been willing even to acknowledge that they work within the constraints of an ideological orientation imposed by Zionism.” Nonetheless, two dominant figures in the new Israeli literary arena – Etgar Keret and Yitzhak Laor – have engaged with the military experience from these new emerging perspectives, and have recreated the military experience from such a ‘post-Zionist’ platform.

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22 IDF slogan denoting the moral struggle of combat soldiers instructed to shoot rubber or plastic bullets to disperse mass civilian demonstrations. For more on this see Ruth Linn, Conscience at War: The Israeli Soldier as a Moral Critic, Suny Series in Israeli Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) 148.


Military Inversions: Etgar Keret’s ‘Pipelines’

Many Hebrew writers have a sense of responsibility, a wish to present things like a parliamentary committee. They don’t write about people walking around the house and scratching themselves, but rather about people who are creating a kind of national narrative. Everything they do is of great importance, because we are a small country surrounded by enemies. 25

Etgar Keret

At the height of his popularity Etgar Keret said to Yoram Kaniuk – “people usually spout clichés which have no connection with reality but are really withered and cover completely different things.”26 Keret has successfully broken through these truisms, which he frequently identifies in “statesman-like and triumphant”27 modern and realist literature. Keret’s works have infused Israeli literature with an absurd dimension that captures the anomalies that typify Israel, which have been touched upon in this study. Stylistically, Keret’s stories follow the outline described by Balaban and Gurevitz in their respective analyses of postmodern fiction. His language is ‘lean’ and blends spoken vernaculars with lyrical expressions. Keret’s self-reflexive approach, asserts Gurevitz, indicates the insufficiency of language to faithfully represent the reality of Israel in the 1990s.28 Hever adds that lean writing comes to signify spiritual leanness.29

Pipelines, Keret’s first published collection of short stories, met with meteoric success upon publication in 1992. The title of the collection evokes the image of an “anatomy of escape routes”30 from the national burdens of Israel. The retreat in Keret’s oeuvre is towards the absurd that pervades his world. The collection contains fifty-nine short stories about individuals stranded in incomprehensible situations: odd sexual relationships, work, military service. The characters struggle to protect their identity against an external reality that


29 Hanan Hever, Literature Written from Here (Tel Aviv: Miskal - Yediot Ahronot Books and Chemed Books, 1999) 144.

is both hostile and illogical. Of this, Yehudit Oryan writes, Keret has “a reverse brain that paradoxically demands strict logical validity, because the absurd is the loyal ally of the logical condition.”\(^{31}\) The paradoxes he depicts exist as the reversals or inversions of key constructs in Israeli culture.

Thirteen of the stories in *Pipelines* concern the military experience. The most apparent aspect of these stories is the violence embodied in the military, mirroring the ‘civilian’ violence of the other stories. While the ‘civilian’ violence is seen to emanate from the continued impact of the Holocaust, social isolation and consumerism, the violence found in the military setting emanates from the imposition of a warring rhetoric onto male soldiers who fail to find meaning in their national service. Themes such as the acquiescence to military death, the suffocation of individuality in the military setting and the abuse that occurs due to these infringements, pervade the collection.

Some critics have claimed Keret’s fiction is nihilistic and devoid of hope.\(^{32}\) However, upon closer reading his stories are seen to contain severe criticism of the institutions that govern life in Israel and the power dynamics that operate them. Gurevitz concurs:

> In contrast to the hedonistic and destructive image that supposedly celebrates this lingual crisis, we can – if we want – identify a critical stance in regards to cultural popularity, personal identity and myths that pervade general and Israeli culture.\(^{33}\)

Interviewed in 2003, Keret commented:

> All the violence and evil around you are very banal and cliché-like. It is very difficult not to become numb when you are exposed to so much pain on a daily basis. You cannot do much more in this kind of situation than remind yourself and your audience that there is another way to exist and that fighting for a more moral existence is as important as fighting for your physical survival.\(^{34}\)

The extreme cruelty in these stories is necessary to access the desensitised Israeli reader who has seen it all and felt it all in flesh. These extremes of violence are presented as allegorical scenarios that cultivate scepticism rather

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than outrage. Furthermore, the Tel-Avivian ‘hipness’ associated with Keret’s writing is stripped of its frivolity when one considers the nonsensical brutality that floods the military stories.

“Not Human” (Lo Bnei Adam) depicts a unit of Israeli soldiers. The story contains no identities, only a collection of extremely diverse people, so dissimilar as to appear to belong to different caricatured species: a hairy naked midget, a sweaty black soldier brandishing a knife, and an emaciated mute man covered with scars. Ethnicity and rank are the only markers in this unit. These caricatured men are then coalesced into one image of violence. The story opens with a game of backgammon. Is the brutality perpetrated by these soldiers towards themselves, their fellow soldiers, and Arab civilians also a game? They emerge as an oddly assembled group of underground fighters, like some foreign legion. They have no sense of nationalism, and the only commonalities they share are their social isolation, and the prescribed view that Arabs, ironically, are the ones that are ‘not human.’

During their daily military routine, patrolling the streets of an Arab city, the unit’s driver intentionally collides into an old man crossing the road. Stein, the new recruit, is shocked:

Stein didn’t quite understand what just happened, he turned his head and saw the body on the footpath, Zanzuri laughing, and the Cherkesan chewing gum. He tried to add up all these images together into one logical reality and couldn’t.35

However, Keret writes so that we can. The readers face a Tarantino-like world wherein hyper-aggressive weirdos are the actors in Israel’s heroic drama. The unit is amused and disturbed by a grotesque act of brutality, which in turn leads to an even more grotesque consequence, the gutting of a Palestinian man whose innards are “rolled-up flags, pamphlets, lollies and public phone tokens.”36 The grotesque forms a central part of the author’s perception of the military experience.

Another permutation on Israel’s imagined warrior hero is the Kochi trilogy, said by Ofir to be the central story around which the collection is based.37 In the trilogy’s first instalment, “Kochi”, we are introduced to a diminishing unit of

35 Etgar Keret, Pipelines, eds. Hanan Hever and Moshe Ron (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992) 15. All translations by the author.

36 Keret, Pipelines 17.

soldiers besieged in a derelict building in Lebanon. While under heavy gunfire the narrating commander and his soldiers cannot contend with the incessant and irritating banter of their fellow soldier, Kochi (a woman’s name). Keret then introduces the absurd into the story – rabbits with antennae tails are those shooting at the unit, mistakenly believing it to be Syrian. Kochi suggests they all play “the imitations game”38 (charades), to raise the unit’s morale. An injured soldier, trembling from massive blood loss, is likened to a blender. Kochi continues to make assertions and suggestions that fail to recognise the direness of the unit’s situation.

The narrating commander of the unit is considered and serious, anchoring the story. Simultaneously, he is the most grotesque character in the unit for his earnestness, completely redundant in the face of Kochi’s absurdity. One of the soldiers then shoots Kochi between the eyes, begging for “Quiet, a bit of quiet”39. Kochi “was apparently prepared to die, but did not, under any circumstance, agree to shut up.”40 In a bizarre inversion of Israel’s fallen soldier ethos, Kochi is said to die, but continues to harass his fellow soldiers with constant chat, just as he had when alive.

In “Kochi 2” the absurdities continue: we learn that Kochi is short for Kochava, as his parents wished he were a girl; after his death Kochi spreads peanut butter on the tanks to confuse the enemy’s camels. And if that was not enough, the story culminates with a singing and dancing dead Israeli soldier. Shlomo Cohen, the cook at the base, forwards a formal complaint to his superiors because he is a Cohen and cannot therefore serve alongside a dead person. His actions emphasise how normal Kochi’s existence is in the military unit.41 The amazement that strikes us given the activity of the fallen soldier and his fellow soldiers is confronted with a dry and matter-of-fact depiction of the events. The blunt delivery of such provocative themes creates a collision between the regular world that is familiar to the reader and a macabre world with no discernible rules.

“Kochi 3” concludes the trilogy, and sees the abrupt termination of the narrative, mid-sentence, by the dead soldier. Before his sabotage of the

38 Keret, Pipelines 21.
39 Keret, Pipelines 20.
40 Keret, Pipelines 21.
41 Mendelssohn-Maoz, “Possible Worlds in the Works of Orly Castel-Blum and Etgar Keret” 57.
narrative, Kochi states that the book Pipelines, which he is given as a present for his completion of military service, contains only three good stories. ‘The rest,’ he says, ‘are rubbish.’ The story ends – “Kochi continued to intentionally damage the coherence of the plot, ‘don’t worry, Zohar, this Etgar is a nerd, I’ve known him for a while, he won’t stop our”\textsuperscript{42} This self reference and the confrontation between Keret and his own story-bound character highlights the disintegration of temporal, spatial, and causal connections between the fictional and non-fictional worlds.

“Nylon” tells of the abuse a sergeant doles out to his soldiers while carrying out a ‘nyloning’ exercise. He is training the soldiers to immaculately seal their possessions, “because a good nylon is an inseparable part of a good soldier.”\textsuperscript{43} The officer resembles other officers in the collection, who “mostly move along with the sequence of insanity and pure sadism.”\textsuperscript{44} In this short story the central theme is self-protection against the officer and the military environment, but this self-protection concludes with self-inflicted violence. One of the soldiers, who had absorbed so much humiliation and de-humanisation from his sergeant during military training, wraps his entire body in nylon and continues to participate in normal military activity. When he returns home to his unnamed partner (‘she’), the nylon that had served him so well in the military world begins to fail him. We are told:

Two weeks before the end of training, when she said the army had changed him, made him into another, that he recoils from her kisses, avoids her touch. How could he explain to her the synthetic flavour in his mouth, the artificial sticky feel of her body, the feeling of suffocation? For a moment he thought he heard the sound of air escaping through some hidden hole in the plastic shroud. But it was just the murmur of the door closing behind her. He wanted to cry, but there were no tears in his eyes. What is the point in hermetic plastic if you’re wet on the inside anyway?\textsuperscript{45}

The soldier then coolly raises a blade to his neck, whispering ‘training is over, I can open the nylon.’ The hermetic plastic seal, conveyed as the ultimate marker of a good soldier, not only does not protect him, but in fact pushed him out of society, and, as with so many other tortured characters in Israeli fiction, towards suicide.

\textsuperscript{42} Keret, Pipelines 127.

\textsuperscript{43} Keret, Pipelines 87.

\textsuperscript{44} Alon Gayer, ”To Hell and Back,” Haaretz 12th June 1992. n.p.

\textsuperscript{45} Keret, Pipelines 88.
“Character Target” (Matrat Dmut) also focuses on failed self-protection. The story is narrated by the cardboard target at shooting practice, which identifies itself as a fallen soldier from Golani, trapped inside the target:

I try to move my cardboard body but it won’t move a millimetre. Finally Lugasi submits and shoots me, and a split second before the bullet hits me I am a human again and the bullet penetrates and rips. A split second later I am made of cardboard again.\(^{46}\)

Each instant the bullets hit him the fallen soldier is transformed from cardboard back to human flesh. In the words of Gurevitz, Keret reopens “the discussion of images and stereotypes that are natural and accepted.”\(^{47}\) This inversion of reality is a direct challenge to the veneration of fallen soldiers in Israeli commemorative traditions. The target wonders whether the others enclose soldiers he had known, anyone from Golani. The reality of Keret’s world, where soldiers shoot at targets that could one day be themselves is enabled in a world where the absurd has become normalised.

The collection contains many oblique references to the Intifada. “Motorised Patrol” (Siyur Memuna), the first story in the trilogy “Hebrew Fiction” (Siporet Ivrit) tells of a Palestinian family patrolling the streets, tear gas grenades and weapons at hand. They are tense, waiting for the Israeli soldiers to start a riot. In this reversal of Israeli reality a Palestinian clan suppresses the Israeli army. The captured Israeli soldier is a frightened twelve-year-old boy, much like the company ‘mascot’ killed in Ben-Ner’s Ta’atuon. Fatma, one of the Palestinian combatants, beats him up then cries –

I don’t want to be here... I’m sick of all the cursing and the stones, beating people up all the time. Believe me, they should keep their yucky cities. They can keep on drinking beer in their gross pubs and making small Israeli soldiers, what do we need this for anyway.\(^{48}\)

The cries of female Israeli soldiers accompany the young boy, as he is carried down the stairs by his Palestinian captors. The narrator, one of the Palestinian civilians, wishes to go back to his village, which he locates in the place “where the jackals howl!”, Amos Oz’s allusion to the threatening ‘un-Zionised’ landscape. This story radically inverts and therefore heightens the reality that Ilan Pappe has described as “the basic contradiction between Zionist national

\(^{46}\) Keret, Pipelines 89.


\(^{48}\) Keret, Pipelines 120.
ambitions and their implementation at the expense of the local population in Palestine.”

The second story in the trilogy is “Patrol” (Masa), which tells of the new commodity, ‘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 is surprised to see a name etched into the tree trunk – “Nir Dekel, August Five, Golani Re却naissance Patrol”. As he relates this story to his silent guide, who is helping him to get lost, the ‘tracker’ indeed finds virgin space, but it ends up being right in Tel Aviv. Israeli collective consciousness has moved away from the Israeli landscape, which is now occupied by a form of Palestinian Zionism, a Palestinian connection to the land proving stronger than the Israeli one.

The soldiers in Keret’s collection choose suicide or escape as a solution to the absurd and brutal reality they are plunged into. The common denominator in this oeuvre is Israeli violence upon all its forms, although the violence is muffled by an over-arching system of meaning that is superficially projected onto each story. Keret uses parody in order to undo basic fictional traditions, thus problematising modernist perceptions of the author and the creation of meta-fictions. In other words, Keret highlights the anomalies of his reality, rather than smoothing these over. Keret’s ‘dirty realism’, combined with his reversal of Israeli existential paradigms, reveals his perception of the military as an oppressive sphere that is emptied of legitimacy. Keret’s military world contains no veil of illusion, which the reader would normally use to justify the violence and seek comfort for its disturbing impact. Keret refuses to adhere to the logic and norms of Israel’s previous generations, and promotes a multi-narrative approach to Israelism, much as revisionist historians have done in recent decades.

49 Pappe, “Post-Zionist Critique on Israel and the Palestinians; Part I: The Academic Debate” 33.

50 Keret, Pipelines 123.

51 Gayer, ”To Hell and Back,” n.p.

52 Fabiana Hefetz, "Only the Young Age," Itmon Tel Aviv 6th March 1992. n.p.

Israeli History Deconstructed: Yitzhak Laor’s ‘The People, Food Fit for a King’

What is being destroyed, every day, every night, by guns, by undercover units, by raids and manhunts, by arbitrary orders, without trial, is something greater than ‘civil society’. We are shown the ‘events’: suicide bombings, bombardments of civil neighbourhoods, assassinations of political activists or terrorists. What we do not see is the undermining of society itself.⁵⁴

What then, can the storyteller do? Focus on moments, on fragments of moments, the blink of an eye, and to extract from those moments the most beauty, without sinning with lies, without some proposal for an entire world, because there isn’t an entire world, because there isn’t one thing in the world, not to mention one speaker in the world, who could seriously point out and say this is the world, the whole world, and I am also the world.⁵⁵

Yitzhak Laor

Yitzhak Laor is commonly touted in Israel as a radical, known for his politically overt non-fiction, and for his provocative poetry, for which he gained public recognition in the 1980s. Laor fails to adhere to the leaness that characterises the writing of many ‘Different Wave’ writers, with which he is commonly grouped. This is explained in part by his background in the poetic medium. His first novel, The People, Food Fit for a King (1993), has received much critical acclaim for its fusion of the ideas of revisionist historians with a revised narrative form. Emerging after a decade of postmodernist Hebrew fiction, the novel was hailed by one critic as “the most subversive book...which I have ever read in Hebrew.”⁵⁶

*The People, Food Fit for a King* is so titled in reference to Homer’s Iliad, and the story of Agamemnon, accused therein of being a king who consumes his subjects. The novel spans over five hundred pages of dense, inter-textual, cross-referential, allegorical, symbolical and provocative descriptions of the anguish of Israeli society, condensed into the military experience. Hanan Hhever has stated that Laor’s novel is a lingual and fictional experiment that is also an


experiment in Israeli history, and while it converges with many of the themes explored in the works examined thus far, its synthesis of these themes emerges from a different perspective, which, similarly to Keret’s approach, subverts basic Zionist tenets.

In *The People, Food Fit for a King* Laor presents the reader with an alternative narrative to the story of the 1967 Six Day War. The story is set in a military supplies base near the temporary Egyptian border in the autumn of 1966. The soldiers that populate the base, ‘Jobnikim’, are idle, either following or ignoring orders. They are grappling with their meaningless lives as soldiers following illogical and arbitrary instructions from their troubled superiors. For instance, one soldier is ordered to be a flag, and then another is ordered to be a placard. Their only marker of difference is their six-digit personal number rather than their name, for “personal numbers, in contrast, assist in making the distinction: an 8 is completely different to a 7.” They are all infected with the same persistent itch, originating in some ill defined and later denied plague that spread throughout the military ranks of the country. The soldiers all retreat into the same vacuous stare that seems the only act of resistance they can muster, while their commander, Rafi, disappointed by his military career, ends up in prison, covered in shit and refusing to speak.

Adjacent to their camp and across the broken fence lies an Armoured Corps base with diligent, active, and devoted soldiers, ready for combat. These neighbours serve as a constant reminder of the supplies-base soldiers’ lowliness in the military hierarchy, which reflects broader power dynamics in the country. However, it is the supplies base soldiers who manage to sabotage the war on June 5th 1967. The neighbouring soldiers are all killed in accidental friendly Israeli fire, in an inversion of the heroic glory attributed to the armoured corps in Israel’s collective memory of the war of 1967.

Even in the rough outline of the novel’s plot one can identify themes prevalent in military fiction, including social isolation, self-revulsion, and a plethora of experiences that de-glorify the military experience. Laor has indeed inherited the ‘New Wave’ tendency to psychologically explore his character’s psyche (unlike Keret). Laor, within his own career, has progressed from a

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57 Hever, *Literature Written from Here* 159.
58 Laor, *The People, Food Fit for a King* 72.
59 Laor, *The People, Food Fit for a King* 22.
modernistic style to one that is more akin to postmodernist writing. However, Laor’s originality lies in his approach to narrative in the novel. It is in this approach to the fictional medium that Laor’s opus truly evokes the ideas of the ‘New Historians’ and the problematic post-Zionist ideology. This is achieved by Laor in a variety of ways, each of which must be examined separately.

The main component that lends Laor’s novel its uniqueness is the writer’s attempt to negate any possibility of an over-arching meta-narrative. By inserting qualifying words of refrain such as ‘maybe’, ‘perhaps’, and ‘possibly’ beside any potential statement of fact, Laor retards the story’s ability to represent a reality, and reduces his own credibility and that of his offered counter-narrative. In addition, Laor chose to include meta-literary or non-fictional comments directed at the publisher and translator of the work. Of these Ariel Hirschfeld states, “These comments bring to the book a typical postmodern awareness regarding the ever-changing nature of meaning in any environment and any context and sharpen greatly the awareness to artistic manipulation.”61

The work cannot therefore be grasped as a reliable representation of reality; its mimesis cannot be accepted unquestioningly. Instead of one collectively sponsored version of the events of those critical years, Laor focuses on a multitude of ‘mini-narratives.’ These alternatives are devoid of nationalist fervour and conversely replete with alienation and doubt. Laor’s chosen ‘mini-narratives’ contradict the subscribed statist experience of the 1967 war. This leads to a persistent tension in the novel between the act of narration and the need to penetrate the truth of the characters, and the inability to narrate any one event without obscuring another, of which the reader is constantly reminded.

This tension is compounded by the narrator’s fluid vantage point – at times he is one of the soldiers, at others he is an all-knowing narrator. When probing the innermost thoughts of his characters, Laor then subtly switches to another character and a monologue that began with one ends up being that of another. Of this Balaban writes – “this flexible vantage point, qualifying its story time and time again with ‘perhaps’, ‘presumably’ and ‘if’, reflects the psychological

60 Balaban, A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction 30.

and social perceptions contained in the novel.\footnote{Balaban, A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction 217.} Although this creates a world filled with doubts and fragmentation, Laor still wishes to represent this fractured world truthfully.

The novel presents the reader with individuals’ need for self-protection against a reality in which national obligations threaten to eradicate their identity. Laor thus alludes to themes present in Kenaz’s \textit{Heart Murmur}, Ben-Ner’s \textit{Ta’atun} and Keret’s \textit{Pipelines}. The first element of threat is expressed in Laor’s depiction of the military world as inescapable, for the soldiers of the supplies base are entrapped by higher ranking officers, beyond which lies their abstract enemy, who is also surrounded by higher ranking military personnel. Like caged animals, the soldiers circle the perimeter of their base, demarcating their limited territory. Within this environment, the characters often revert back to their wounded, fragile inner self – be it “a sick baby,”\footnote{Laor, \textit{The People, Food Fit for a King} 233.} or an unhatched gosling.\footnote{Laor, \textit{The People, Food Fit for a King} 260.} Military service, which is experienced as “forced labour”\footnote{Laor, \textit{The People, Food Fit for a King} 275.} and involves great humiliation and abuse, reveals the gap between the fragile identity of the soldier and the national obligations placed upon his shoulders. Once again, the military is perceived as an environment that tries to conceal individual difference in favour of overarching uniformity, placing selfhood in grave danger. Some survive this threat, while others retreat into insanity.

It seems that through “focusing on moments,”\footnote{Laor, \textit{The People, Food Fit for a King} 151.} entailing an emphasis on the multi-faceted aspect of each moment and the variety of often conflicting emotions that inform one’s experience of it, Laor returns these characters their voice. He thus opens up avenues for the further illumination of hidden aspects of the Israeli experience. The suffering connecting the lonely individuals populating the pages of the novel is somewhat alleviated by the author’s attention to the details of their torment. This approach in turn encourages a similar sensitivity towards other, implied, marginalised groups within Israel, and their own narrative.

Another key theme in the novel is the juxtaposition between silence and words. Ironically, silence and voicelessness are communicated through a rich
and poetic language. Chaim Nagid has said of this, “The lingual wealth is meant to reveal the fundamental dullness of existence, its depressing poverty and barrenness and the pointlessness of its interpretation and prosaic expression.”

In the first part of the novel Laor states: “silence and man’s freedom are sisters”; Elsewhere in the novel we encounter the soldier’s voicelessness and alienation from himself:

inside the armour someone else is hidden, someone who doesn’t belong here, hiding in another place, here only to carry out his tasks, returning a gaze that is not his, replying to a question about his wellbeing with foreign sounds emanating from his suit, a distant voice, returning into the body through the cheek bones, responding to wonder with wonder.

Silence represents the personal, the unique and the unconscious, that which has no expression in the social order. On a social plane, silence represents those who were silenced, the soldiers who have no right to speak in the military sphere, as well as the dispossessed Arabs and Bedouins who inhabit the soldiers’ landscape. Words, on the other hand, signify the language into which humans grow and the social order this language represents. Accordingly, Laor writes that “Hebrew is the cage into which we were spawned isn’t it?” All those in positions of power over the soldiers – the commanders, politicians, as well as academics and authors alluded to in the text – possess the ability to speak. The soldiers prefer to engage in vacant staring instead of articulating and expressing themselves. Balaban writes:

Vacant staring means ignoring the norms that the military tries to instil in its soldiers (recognition of the undeniable value of the state and the army and their service out of complete devotion, seeing the combat soldier as the pinnacle of the military system) and wins the enthusiastic praise of the author.

Nissim Calderon, despite objecting to what he calls Laor’s “sensationalism” and “vulgarly,” affirms this interpretation of the hollow gaze. Calderon

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68 Laor, The People, Food Fit for a King 68.
69 Laor, The People, Food Fit for a King 99.
70 Laor, The People, Food Fit for a King 219.
71 Balaban, A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction 234.
72 Nissim Calderon, Multiculturalism Versus Pluralism in Israel (Tel Aviv: Haifa University Publishing and Zmora Bitan, 2000) 99.
acknowledges that from this aimless gaze the author derives a political stance that enables a representation of the silent majority and their narrative.\footnote{Calderon, \textit{Multiculturalism Versus Pluralism in Israel} 100.}

These notions are developed further by Laor’s approach to names in his novel. Many of the characters are given mock military names based on their rank (\textit{Khayaliko}, \textit{Toraniko}, \textit{Soheriko} and so on), while actual names are repeatedly changed or mistaken. Few of the characters are given biographical details that would lend meaning to their name and character. While this is a reality experienced not only within the military sphere, it is here that this condition is amplified. In the words of Balaban:

The forceful military system erases the individual and unique and tries to unify and flatten its subjects… the name – meant to represent the soldier, his special essence – becomes the property of others, becomes foreign, strange and threatening.\footnote{Balaban, \textit{A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction} 225.}

Nonetheless, references are made in the novel to naming in the civilian sphere, and in particular the obliteration of ethnic difference through the ‘Zionification’ of foreign names and therefore experience. Ultimately, names are forced onto the characters of the novel, both in the military and civilian spheres, and like the military uniform that doesn’t quite fit, lead the characters towards self-repulsion and estrangement. Names are a source of lament for the characters, because like language, names have lost their representational value; all they represent is the power of the name-giver.\footnote{Balaban, \textit{A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction} 223-24.}

Laor further uses names to draw direct parallels between the power network of the military system and the Israeli literary arena. For example, we meet Colonel Dan Mirom, whose name scathingly evokes literary critic Dan Miron, while the above-cited Calderon is here the name of the penis a prostitute labours to stiffen.\footnote{Laor, \textit{The People, Food Fit for a King} 272.} References are made to Amos Oz’s \textit{In The Pale Blue Light}, while Oz himself is “the charismatic new Defence Minister.”\footnote{Laor, \textit{The People, Food Fit for a King} 526.} A. B. Yehoshua is also identified in the novel as part of the power structure, as his name is given to the deputy head of the homeowners organization in Tel Aviv.\footnote{See Laor, \textit{The People, Food Fit for a King} 502.} Elsewhere Laor has stated that A.B. Yehoshua refused to sign the letter ‘Dai’ of 5\textsuperscript{th} June
1982 which demanded an immediate withdrawal from Lebanon;\textsuperscript{79} Yehoshua reasoned that he was a reserve duty man and a main education officer, and as such could not support such a demand. Laor injects these political realities into the fictional medium. His critique is therefore directed not only at the obliteration of individual identity in the military setting. The novel also grapples with the cultural elite of the Zionist Left, identified as the ‘New Wave.’

By the end of Laor’s novel, the supposed centre of the plot – the events leading to the prevention of the Six Day War – has been pushed to the margins and receives the status of by-the-way notes. This ending raises some of the issues surrounding the veneration of dead soldiers as dictated by Israel’s civil religion. The soldiers of the neighbouring base are “appropriated by the state to be cherished and commemorated as emblematic representations of the nations’ heroic spirit and historic glory.”\textsuperscript{80} Considering their actual demise in friendly fire, this veneration only serves to underline the essential emptiness of such patriotic verbiage.

Of greater significance in the novel is the central confrontation between the inner and personal, and the external and militaristic. This parallels a broader juxtaposition between personal memory and national memory. This aspect of the novel converges with the ‘post-Zionist’ reality of the 1990s in Israel. Military service according to Laor is the ultimate manifestation of the collective’s stronghold upon the individual, overcoming and overwhelming his or her personal voice. On one plane the novel is one of historical speculation, retrospectively asking what would have happened had the war never taken place. The work therefore emerges, in part, from a recognition that 1967 continues to reverberate through Israeli society. However, Laor usurps this retrospective approach in an effort to deconstruct Israeli militarism. He subverts the ensuing national ethos that lead an entire nation to sacrifice its life and to see in that the fulfilment of a noble national cause. He evokes the distortion of personal memory, required by the collective ambitions of Zionism. One critic stated that it is the collective that emerges as the rapist of identity in this work.\textsuperscript{81} Laor’s conclusion is that the events of 1967 created one of the most dangerous political illusions in the history of the young state, replacing the very

\textsuperscript{79} Bar'am, "Laor Returns to the Army," n.p.

\textsuperscript{80} Blum and Witzum, "War-Related Loss and Suffering in Israeli Society: An Historical Perspective." 3.

real violence, oppression and alienation of that time with “the fake glory and fame that came after 1967.”

Although Laor’s lengthy novel decries the absence of meaning in language and the ensuing obstacles to communion, Laor succeeds in using language in the fictional medium to evoke the condition of Israeli society in the present day. Laor achieves this by the re-narration of the personal torment of individuals who participated in past formative events of Israel. Simultaneously, the boundaries between fiction and truth become blurred, thus reflecting some of the deep doubts that have emerged in Israel over recent decades regarding the Zionist narrative. By writing about the events in Israel before the occupation Laor highlights his political understanding of the conditions of Israeli society: they are inherent to Zionism rather than to the occupation itself. While some have criticised the novel for its “spiritual emptiness,” Laor’s epic conveys the difficulty of forming a national narrative, and depicts the military sphere as the most apt location for the playing out of the tensions between individuals and the collective.

Towards a ‘Post-Zionist’ Fiction: Conclusion

Yitzhak Laor’s synthesis of the military experience is conveyed from a ‘post-Zionist’ platform, as he overtly confronts Zionist paradigms. Etgar Keret however engages with Israeli militarisation through a culturally inverted synthesis of ‘post-Zionist’ or post-national ideology. Although the authors of the ‘Different Wave’ are typified by the rejection of all accepted centres of authority and their attributable meanings and significances, they succeed in opening up new avenues of imagination and expression of the existential distresses of Israeli society. Both Keret and Laor, in their own ways, reject the temptation “to tell a heroic story, to create huge dramas,” believing instead that this very temptation is flawed.

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84 Balaban, A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction 70.
85 Gadi Taub, The Dispirited Rebellion (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997) 50.


Text and Context: Israeli Fiction and Israeli Life

"A truly good book is something as wildly natural and primitive, mysterious, and marvellous, ambrosial and fertile as a fungus or a lichen."

Henry David Thoreau

The ‘New Wave’ works examined in chapter one revealed the fall of the heroic Israel, a process that takes place – at least in part – along gender lines of identification. Traditionally, an integral part of Israeli masculinity has been intimately bound up with individual participation in army life and an ongoing martial tradition. This gender collapse is brought about – again, in part – by the declining status of the Israeli military in collective consciousness.

The second chapter delved into the specific features of the Israeli military institution that have imbued it with such centrality in Israeli identity. In addition, it is the various aspects of the IDF explored in this chapter that have traditionally enabled it to function as social glue. The fiction analysed in this chapter however, shows this as no longer the case. The same aspects of the military that were once celebrated are now contested, and lead to social and individual disintegration.

In chapter three postmodern fictions were examined. Laor transfers to fiction the notion that “the present, as well as the past, is always already irremediably textualised for us.”¹ According to Laor we can only understand the world through our narratives of it. As David Carr notes, “narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence.”² The drive towards unity and universality, central features of modernism, were elements found in the works examined in the first and second chapters. In the works of Keret and Laor however, these are replaced by an embracing of the crisis prompted by the

erosion of Zionism. Here, the same reality that breeds fear also breeds new poetic forms.

Fiction, it has been argued, is the expression of people’s lives as they try to understand their function and significance in the world. As the world changes, fiction also changes, and its production then in turn acts upon the world. Carr posits the fact we tell ourselves stories “in order to become clear on what we are on about” makes clear the practical function of storytelling in our lives. He concludes, powerfully, that storytelling is “a constitutive part of action, and not just an embellishment, commentary, or other incidental accompaniment.”

It must be noted that the works discussed in this study by no means encompass the wealth of literature concerning the military experience in Israel between the 1960s and the current day. S. Yizhar, Uri Avneri, Shlomo Nitzan, Elisha Porat, Ran Edelist, Binyamin Tammuz, Yitzhak Orpaz, are Israeli writers who have examined the military experience in their fiction. More recently, Adam Baruch, Or Spivak, and Hagai Linik have engaged with the military dimension of Israeli life in postmodern or ‘post-Zionist’ ways.

The works selected for discussion in this study, taken together, convey a process of transformation, not only in the literary arena, but also within greater Israeli society. This change has been viewed by some as testimony of a gradual decline in social cohesion in Israel. Others, however, claim it is a marker of Israel’s ‘coming of age’ in seeking to crystallise a ‘normal’ identity that is not anchored to the specifically Jewish experience.

While all preoccupied with the same social transformations, the works presented in this study have several quite obvious dissimilarities from each other. This is a result namely of shifting attitudes to Zionism. The three phases of Israeli literature alluded to in the study demonstrated a steady progression

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3 Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* 61.

4 Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* 61.

5 Military fiction has also been written by Yotam Reuveni, Israeli Hameiri, Natan Shaham, Aba Kovner, Dan Ben-Amotz, Sammy Michael, Hanoch Bartov, Amir Gilboa, Amnon Navot.
from absolute faith in ideology to a complete abandonment of it. The first of these phases was Palmach literature.

Amnon Navot interrogates the Palmach canon, and asks how it is that an entire generation privileged the generic, the mythical, and the collective, at the cost of developing genuine and autonomous individual identities.⁶ On the basis of one collective experience this generation was left spiritually crippled and emptied of personal inner content, claims Navot. This question clearly occupies the minds of many Israeli authors, as the Palmach hero, the personification of the collective, has returned to Israeli literature persistently, albeit in vastly different guises.

Palmach literature failed to express the inherent tensions and anomalies of the materialising nation. Rather, their ambition tended in the opposite direction: gearing masses to the Zionist project. The subsequent ‘New Wave’ shift became increasingly preoccupied with some of the inconsistencies involved with the dream that had animated previous generations. Furthermore, ‘New Wave’ authors revolutionised the ways in which Israeli life could be imagined. Symbolic, allegorical, absurd, and fantastic literature became preferred over naturalistic fiction. Although not giving up entirely on the Zionist ideal, their works convey an awareness of the insufficiencies of Zionism and the impossibility of achieving its ideal.

‘Different Wave’ fiction marks yet another turning point in the fictional responses to life in Israel. ‘Different Wave’ authors are critical of ‘New Wave’ literature, much as ‘New Wave’ writers bemoaned the lacks in the Palmach canon. Postmodern and ‘post-Zionist’ writers contend with the faults they perceive in modernistic fiction, namely, its failure to acknowledge the unwavering presence of a flawed master-narrative. The problems and internal conflicts in Israel are seen by ‘Different Wave’ writers as intrinsic, and cannot simply be reformed out of existence or winked out of sight.

The authors of the ‘New Wave’ may object to the military and its glorification, but Keret and Laor see their works as representatives of hegemonic Zionism. ‘Different Wave’ authors purport to break through this ideological barrier,

casting their gaze upon sites hitherto restricted by the Zionist paradigm. Doubtless the next wave to follow will reach its own conclusions on the matter. In the modernist ‘New Wave’ works examined in chapters one and two the cracks in the wall of heroism were revealed, while in ‘Different Wave’ fiction the entire edifice came crashing down. The fragmented society and its deteriorating ideological values became taken for granted.

Yoram Kaniuk, himself always in the margins of ‘New Wave’ literature, said authors such as Keret mark a departure from Zionism as a trigger for their creative imagination. In his view, the trope of Zionism, which suffused the imagination of ‘New Wave’ authors, became a less central concern for writers of postmodern fiction. Rather they express a Tel Avivian entity. He states:

This Tel Avivianism is supposedly light, but it isn’t. It has no state. It has no mother and father. It is its own family. It does not sing about uprooting and doesn’t know what that is. Its here for life, for the language, because Tel Aviv is the capital of Israelism...Keret is not tormented. He represents none other but himself.7

Nonetheless, beneath these surface differences all these works share definite underlying similarities. Common to all is a departure from the idealistic mythology of the Palmach generation and its followers, towards a mature sobriety. What are some of the commonalities these authors share?

A prominent motif in these works is unresolved guilt towards the occupied. This guilt manifested itself as insanity, an unbearable stench, vacant staring, and isolation in other forms. Common to all eight texts is the representation of a retreat into a private, pre-natal world. The commander in The People, Food Fit for Kings yearns for glory, and this is what leads him to imprisonment, isolation and madness. He chooses muteness and excrement to isolate himself from the world, much as Holi Tsidon had in Ben-Ner’s Ta’atuon. Yehoshua’s last commander too chose death-like abandon over engagement. Isolation was also the solution for Rieger’s daughter in Kaniuk’s His Daughter, in the face of the death-driven world embodied in his character. Such isolation was satirised in

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Keret’s “Patrol,” where the search for aloneness in virgin space can be found right in the heart of Tel Aviv, the last place one would think to look.

*Ta’atuon* can be seen to contain the seeds for the inversion that received full treatment by Keret. Ben-Ner evokes the possible similarities between Holi and the beaten Palestinian man, thus inverting the victim/perpetrator equation. The characters of Oded and Holi raise doubt as to the military/civilian and father/son anomalies. In addition (in the relationship between Harul and Fauzi) the enemy/ally and Jewish/Arab distinctions are blurred. By focusing on the similarities between these supposedly contrasting positions, Ben-Ner shows the Intifada and the social and civilian reality that surround it, as anomalous. Such dualities were also located in Yehoshua’s “The Last Commander,” where military prowess and military stagnation were juxtaposed.

These similarities can perhaps be better explained when we consider Carr’s argument that each community is "faced with the constant possibility of its own 'death'; if it is not threatened with destruction from without, it must deal with its own centrifugal tendencies towards dissolution or fragmentation from within." Carr argues that all narrative is part of this wider project. Through all these different periods and generations in Israel, storytelling has been consistently preoccupied with this above theme. It is through the narration of life in Israel in fiction that meaning is ascribed to the rapid social change typical of the country. It is through “discovering or rediscovering the story, picking up the thread, reminding ourselves where we stand, where we have been and where we are going,” that Israeli society gains a sense of its origins, as well as its continuing search for coherence and integrity. The passing of Zionism, of military prowess, and of the operating ideals and dreams has taken place in and through the act of storytelling.

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8 Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* 163.

9 Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* 168.
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