Abortion and the single woman as literary tropes in the works of Amos Oz

By Dvir Abramovich, University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract:
This paper provides a gender-based reading of texts by Israeli Author Amos Oz, in particular Fima, My Michael, A Perfect Peace as well as several short stories. The constructions of unmarried women and of abortion are focused on as tropes betraying the reactionary gender politics in these texts. The analysis reveals that the representation of abortion is rhetorically biased, representing the decision as selfish, the operation as inhumane and the foetus as a child, while exaggerating the psychic risks for women undergoing abortion. The unmarried female characters in Oz' texts are shown to be presented according to sexist stereotypes, which is further supported by the asymmetry in comparison to their male counterparts.

1 With few exceptions, Israeli literary criticism since the country's establishment in 1948 has been concerned with the examining of the Zionist enterprise, nation and state building issues and the Arab Israeli conflict (Shaked, Megged). As a result, feminist revisions and enquiry into gender constructions in the Israeli canon have been noticeably missing. However, this paucity of gender research has thankfully changed over the last decade, with several scholars opening up this rich, diverse and exciting area.

2 In the manner of wider sociological trends, Israeli fiction has turned away from the state generation's predominant message of ideals and ideology, away from the parochial motif of the struggle between the individual and the state. After half a century, important new voices and variants are being heard, voices that do not sit within the exclusive domain of the modernist Zionist version and are not influenced by traditional canonical modes of expression and concerns. In many ways, the disassociation from the customary prisms of the literary establishment has triggered a dialectic pattern whose undercurrents are formatively shaking up the traditional Israeli identity developed by the diegesis of the mainstream writers (Bartana, Bezherano, Moked, Shamir).

3 In the introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism* we read: "Whether concerned with the literary representation of sexual difference, with the ways that literary genres have been shaped by masculine or feminine values [...] feminist criticism has established gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis" (Showalter, 1985: 3). Intriguingly and lamentably, however, the fiction of Israel's greatest living author and two time Nobel Prize nominee Amos Oz has been relatively shielded from the piercing eye of feminist discussion and from the ongoing dialogue between literature and gender hermeneutics. Despite the critical surfeit

regarding his letters, comparatively speaking, feminist reappraisal of Oz's canon is still in its embryonic stage.

4 This article, examines the motifs of abortion and the single woman in the Oz corpus. It has been informed by a methodological thematic feminist approach to re-examine several of the Amos Oz texts. At heart, the locus of this examination has been to re-evaluate the author's narratives through feminist lenses, to predominantly re-enter its fictional dimensions and strategies with the particular objective aim of uncovering misogynous presumptions and distorted images of women. In the questions raised herein we have attempted to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies and their commensurate forms of ideas, values and syntax that for so long have served to transfer cultural and social antifeminist representations of women into textual discourse.

5 Our primary concern has been to become a 'resisting reader', thereby adopting an oppositional reading stance which on the one hand encourages interpreting against the grain of fabricated truisms, and on the other, inevitably leads to the exposing of deforming stereotypes and oppressing misrepresentations that permeate the author's constructions of female characters. In other words, we have engaged in unveiling the beliefs and implicit assumptions that determine the delineation of the female, as well as the underlying premises that disturbingly identify womanliness with an array of sexist attitudes that offensively degrade its female psyche and sexuality.

6 To put it differently, the social construction of gender is still driven by a patriarchal conceptual apparatus which articulates androcentric stereotypes in the portrayal of female protagonists. Thus, Female characters are infantilised and devalued, as well as distinguished from men, by having they're entire being generically defined purely in the sexual realm. Greer underscores the importance of this phenomenon when she writes: "The universal sway of the feminine stereotype is the single most important factor in male and female woman-hatred" (261).

Abortion

7 While the very core of the passionate debate and struggle about abortion has chiefly been a social and political question that has lead to a smorgasbord of discourse and critiques dealing with this operative polemical issue, abortion and its literary manifestation have been, for the most part, unexplored in Israeli fiction and never, to our knowledge, in the stories of Amos Oz.

8 The conflation of abortion and literature bears special relevance to the critic for, as Wilt states, "The confines of art are no less grotesque and complicated than the purlieus of life when it comes to abortion. But at least the truth of the author's intention and his/her achievement remains stable enough to be looked at and argued over" (XI). Indeed, the examination of the intermingling of abortion and fiction has particular salience to Feminist theory and practice as evocatively encapsulated in Ellen Willis's declaration that, "Abortion is first of all the key issue of the new right's antifeminist campaign, the ground on which a larger battle over the very idea of a woman's liberation is fought" (12). In a similar vein, Komisar argues that the question of abortion…is closely tied to the attitude that men have traditionally held about women as people as sexual being" (82). The representation of abortion has been referenced by a constant barrage of negative attacks mirroring the crusade launched by the assortment of Right to Life movements and the Religious Bloc- forces that have attempted to promote the idea that the exercise by women of this reproductive freedom carries with it a moral taint.

9 Compositionally, the literary portrayal of abortion resonates with the bulwark of sexist oppression that characterises male authored texts: a historicized de-legitimization of images of women as models of self determination, possessing power and sexual autonomy and the foregrounding of the retrograde patriarchal belief that innately women are helpless victims who must be denied the right to choose. At heart, male writers seek to rework an old pattern of opposition to reproductive freedom by employing antiabortion iconography and concepts in a thematic strategy to elide positive female representations from their texts, embedding instead de-stabilizing messages aped from anti choice dirges. As Susan Faludi explains, in the backlash climate, abortion was has become a "[...] moral litmus test to separate the good women from the bad" (133).

10 In almost every regard, Oz's narratives reinforce pre-existing traditional dominant ideologies of the antiabortion campaign, with his sub-plots functioning as homilies to denounce women who had abortion. Noticeably absent are an evenhanded debate and a pluralistic vista articulating the divergent views involved. A pronounced failure to delineate the main factors in the crucible of the abortion controversy defines his narrative. Certainly, the attitude towards abortion disclosed in the narrative is inextricably linked to a disapproval of women's emancipation. In Oz, it is masculine cultural conventions that ground the norms of textual representations, establishing one unified position and excluding any reconciliation of the different subjective beliefs nuancing the discussion. Now, it would be foolhardy to maintain that the decision and process is the same for all, and does not carry with it a

multifarious assemblage of emotions and responses. However, the texts to be discussed tend to reject any notion that abortion encompasses a multiplex of experience and is "[...] personal to each circumstance and affects each individual differently," (Francke 43) and thus escapes any monolithic construction.

11 In decoding the authorial intent of the Oz stories dealing with the sentiment and landscape of abortion, four areas of contextual strategy can be identified. The first, depicts the decision of those to procure abortion as selfish and in violation of certain moral edicts, through its principal protagonists flashing back to their shameful episode, haunted by these past ghosts as an imprint of horror engraved on their conscience. Second, similar to the tactics the Right to Life activists were encouraged to adopt, emotive vernacular is employed to describe the foetus, humanising and renaming it as the 'unborn baby/child, portraying abortion as the murdering of a living, entity-like person. Moreover, and taking the literary manipulation a step further, the author uses the motif of 'foetus becomes a person at the time of conception' to breathe corporal life and endow the foetus with fully formed personhood, in addition to having their female and male characters sonorously speculate on the life of their potential offspring. Thirdly, the actual procedure and method of abortion is re-contextualized to present it as metonymic of a bloody and inhuman operation; frequently, the issue of the disposal of the foetuses is replicated to further activate abortion guilt. Lastly, the dark side of the abortion myth is revived through the manifestation of physical and psychic risks resulting from the procedure in one of the heroines who underwent the operation.

12 An exemplar of the first model of literary manipulation is used in the novel *Fima*. Yael, the former wife of the eponymous hero recalls back with remorse to her decision to have an abortion: "I got a child by you and you didn't want it. So, like a good girl, I murdered it so as not to mess up your poetic life" (241). Similarly: "[...] we murdered it and we shut up [...] We both murdered it. Only you didn't want to hear when or where and how. All you wanted to hear from me was that it was all over" (244). Fima, for his part, demurs: "You know very well that what you said earlier isn't the whole truth. You didn't want the baby either" (243).

13 The reflection by Yonatan Lifshits concerning his wife's abortion, in another novel, *A Perfect Peace*, merits a long citation for its sheer orchestration of a morality lecture on the evils of abortion:

> She used to put my hand on her belly to feel the baby move [...] When she had that abortion? Madness. Mysteriously , Yonatan had the sensation of the baby moving in his own belly…Come on, I yelled at her, it's too soon for us to have children. The two of us are fine by ourselves. It's not my job to sire a dynasty for my father. I don't want

> my parents getting into bed with us. And so one morning she went to Haifa and came back empty. (338-339)

14 Aunt Janya, the bitter and tough-talking protagonist in the novel *My Michael*, personifies the stock image of the heartless female who seeks abortion for purely economic reasons — an image cribbed from the lexicon of portraits the antiabortion movement seeks to push. When she hears that Hanna, her nephew's wife is pregnant, she is maddened by the prospect of a child endangering Michael's future career, and proposes the option of abortion. Hanna recalls the shattering conversation, "She accused me of irresponsibility. I would ruin all Michael's efforts at getting on and achieving something in life. Didn't I realise that Michael's progress was my own destiny? And right before his final examinations, too!" (49). It is, however, Janya's underlying financial reasons and the manner in which she raises the issue that brings to the simmer the emotions of horror and disdain the reader experiences. Given Aunt Janya's deportment it is not surprising that Hanna reacts with dismay to the suggestion, running into the kitchen and crying. Later, she remarks on the incident, "I remembered Aunt Janya's distasteful visit at the beginning of my pregnancy, and at times I imagined perversely that it was I who had wanted to get rid of the baby" (67).

15 As Komisar notes, "Opponents also say that someone great may have been lost to the world by abortion" (37) in protesting the imagery and semantic battle the antiabortion movement marshals to incorporate its ideology into mainstream culture. By elevating the foetus into infant status, or at an extreme, the public is in a sense asked to imagine the unborn as a fully grown child, the anti-choice camp wields enormous emotional appeal. It is in this sense, that writers and political activists become bedfellows.

16 Oz skirts along this edge most overreachingly in *Fima*: "Was it not possible that the child Yael had not wanted might have grown up to be world famous?" (284), he ponders. Elsewhere, he and his former wife Yael muse about the possibility that if Yale would not have undergone the abortion, they could have had a son or a daughter. Here are two sequences that are an excellent illustration of the technique mentioned earlier. First Yael:

> He could have been a boy of twenty six by now. He could be a father himself, with a child or two of his own. The eldest might be Dimi's age. And you and I would go into town to buy an aquarium and some tropical fish for the grandchildren. Where do you think the drains of Jerusalem empty out? Into the Mediterranean, via Nahal Shorek? And the sea joins up with Greece, and there the King of Ithaca's daughter might have picked him up out of the waves. Now he's a curly-haired youth sitting playing the lyre in the moonlight on the water's edge in Ithaca. (245)

Then Fima:

> As he walked up towards the Histadrut building, it occurred to him that this obsequious, overfed young man with the sausagelike fingers and starched shirt that had grimy collar and cuffs was more or less the same age as the son that Yael had got rid of two minutes away from here at some clinic [...] However, Fima thought wryly, it might have been a girl. A miniature Giulietta Masina with a soft bright hair. She could have been named after his mother Liza, or in its Hebrew mutation, Elisheva. Although it is certain Yael would have vetoed this. (270)

17 In another scene, Fima wonders whether, an aborted foetus in the clinic may not be Yoezer's (Yoezer being a phantom being Fima imagines will live in his apartment hundred years from now) father or grandfather. Furthermore, following Yael's earlier outburst, quoted in length in the previous paragraph, Fima sinks into despair, "And why does Yael assume it was a boy? What if it was actually a girl? A little Yael with soft long hair and a face like Giulietta Masina? He laid his arms on the table and without opening his eyes hid his weary head on them" (245). One could venture the observation that these meta-textual-discourses, draped in a fictional garb, emblemize quintessential antiabortion propaganda in castigating the practice and maintaining a male preserve, rather than considering both sides of this dispute.

18 Oz's novels capture in miniature, all be it in grandiose strokes, the larger conflation of personal morality and sensational psychological warfare of the antiabortion leaders. In one text Oz parades in the most prosaic fashion heart-wrenching verbose when describing abortion clinics and the simple and safe procedure, so that the reader is invited to conclude that it is executions and butchery that are taking place.

19 The specific text that resides in the centre of this discussion is *Fima*. Since *Fima* takes place in gynaecologist’s clinic (termed the “abortion inferno” (195)), it is inevitable that abortion becomes an underlying subtext. For example, in one segment, Fima chances upon the operating table, detailing in not-so-subtle terms the instruments of 'destruction' :

> [...] he felt a dull pang of revulsion in his stomach [...] Laid out with obsessive precision beside the speculums were long bladed scissors, forceps, IUDs hermetically sealed in sterile plastic. To the left behind the doctor's desk, on a small trolley, stood the suction pump that was used, Fima knew, to terminate pregnancy by means of suction. He shuddered at the though that this was a kind of enema in reverse, and that womanhood was an irreparable injustice. (121)

20 At another extreme, in *My Michael* it is a female voice that is employed to present abortion as an ordinary, unemotional act: "The whole thing is just a simple matter of a twenty minute operation, now worse than having your tonsils out. But there are some complicated women who won't understand the simplest things" (49). In another passage, Fima reflects on the fate of the foetuses:

> And what did they do with the foetuses? Put them in a plastic bag and drop them into the rubbish bins that he and Tamar emptied at the end of the day? Food for alley cats?

> Or did they flush them down at the lavatory and rinse them with disinfectant? Snows of yesteryear. If the light within you darkens, it is written, how great is the darkness. (121)

Yael too, has similar thoughts: "To this day I don't want to know what they do with them. Tinier than a day-old chick. Do they flush them down the lavatory? We both murdered it" (244).

21 Another strategy of antiabortion rhetorics has been the paternalistic contention that women must be deprived of the option to choose because its exercise would result in severe psychological scarring, consequent miscarriages and infertility. In this regard, it may be helpful to recall the research results conducted by American doctors who concluded that safe abortion procedures carried no adverse effects on fertility, and that establishment of a uniform nexus between abortion and mental adversity was extremely tenuous (Faludi 30).

22 It is in *A Perfect Peace* that this imagery is exceedingly embodied in the character of Rimona, through which the entire narrative is presented as a cautionary tale. First, the reader is presented with the physical health effects of Rimona's only abortion: "The preceding summer, several months before Yonatan made up his mind to leave, a sad thing happened to his wife [...] Two years before, Rimona had lost a baby. Then, when she became pregnant again, she was delivered at the end of the summer of a stillborn girl. The doctors advised against her of trying again, at least for the time being (12).

23 Add to this the description of the stillborn delivery which threatened her life: "Two hours ago we decided to get Professor Schillinger himself out of bed [...] He drove all the way from the outskirts of Mount Carmel just in time to save, I mean literally save, your wife's life [...] all that matters is that your wife is alive. Professor Schillinger literally revived her" (71).

24 Moreover, it is strongly suggested that Rimona's eccentric behaviour, bordering on mental retardation (critic Gershon Shaked asserts is that she is partly insane (*Gal* 87)) was caused by the abortion and the subsequent miscarriage. She oscillates between reality and fantasy, acting as if the baby she lost during the second pregnancy, whom she has named Efrat, is still alive. For example, when she speaks of her day's work, she includes her imaginary daughter: "Efrat's crawling on all fours, the golden sand around her warm and clean. And the moonlight swaddles her with silver webs" (171). "I have put Efrat to sleep, too, and now I am all alone" (163). Elsewhere, she plans to soothe Efrat at night, and when the Military police who are investigating Yonatan's disappearance confirm his particulars with her, they are puzzled by her interjection that she and Yonatan have a daughter. At that point, Jonathan’s father intervenes to explain Rimona's mental frailty and the loss of the baby.

25 The terrible punishment meted out to Rimona for the abortion, and the paralysing ghost of the child she is haunted by, suggest both on a literal and allegorical level that the moral universe that dominates *A Perfect Peace*, and the other texts under discussion in this essay, is clearly driven by a patriarchal standpoint.

The Single Woman

26 Popular culture, and particularly, the masculine perspective percolating through the literary canon, have decreed that the single woman is to be pitied and censured for her sexual unacceptability, and her failure to find a suitable mate. In the main, this has been achieved through a cruel and dispraising portrayal, in a writing tradition with a long history. As Rogers explains, the spinster has continually functioned as the subject of ridicule in mainstream literature: "The old maid has provided an even more convenient butt for hostility against women, since she did not justify her existence by being a wife and a mother [. . .] caricatured as ugly, disagreeable, and relentlessly in pursuit of men" (201). Certainly, there has been a lack of positive images of the single woman in male fiction.

27 The stock image of the unmarried woman has been one of a forlorn and frustrated figure, who due to her inability (or refusal) to wed has been derided, scorned and isolated by society as some kind of deviant. Deegan, who conducted one of the first major studies into the representation of the 'unattached' female in popular fiction, concluded, that male authors have subjected the old maid to pillorying which has not extended to male bachelors. In her investigation, she discerned certain assumed feminine qualities that these characters were assigned by the purveyors of this stereotype, qualities that recurred with disturbing familiarity and which maintained the mendacious impression that single women were desperate for a man to marry.

28 A single woman of considerable sadness and loneliness is Geula Sirkin of the stories "Nomad and Viper" and "Before His Time." The prescient male narrator loads up his characterisation with condescension and pity, depicting her as a figure of mockery in the Kibbutz and repeatedly nullifying, in the guise of sympathy, any positive attributes she may possess. As Deegan found in the portrayal of unmarried woman, "The most marked characteristic [. . .] is the repeated reference to unattractive physical qualities, more often that not to ugliness of face or angularity of form" (105). And indeed, from the very outset Geula's unpleasant appearance is accentuated: "Her face was pale and thin [. . .]. A pair of bitter lines were etched at the corners of her mouth [. . .]. On hot days, when faces are covered in sweat,

the acne on her cheeks reddened and she seems to have no hope" (Oz 27-28). In "Before His Time" the emphasis on Geula as homely and graceless continues:

> Her nails are cracked, her hands are rough and scabby, and there are two bitter creases at the corners of her mouth. Her legs are thin and pale and covered with a down of black hairs. That is why she always wears trousers, never a skirt or a dress. And although she is now more than twenty years old, there are still adolescent pimples on her cheeks. (Oz 65)

29 In Kibbutz matters she is a cipher, her contribution confined to that of preparing coffee for cultural and social meetings: a participation which is not unnoticed by the narrator. With a dollop of irony he points out that although still without a husband , her ability to make the finest coffee whenever needed was always appreciated by the members'. This comment would seem to accord with Deegan's conclusions about the attitudes expressed by central or secondary characters towards the unmarried female protagonist: "Some characters express pity and ridicule [. . .] some kind of admiration is often mingled with adverse attitudes" (105). Importantly, in the main introduction the narrator fleetingly refers to her age of twenty nine, implying that with every passing day her plight is worsening and that is why she is such an embittered and morose character: "I avoid her glance, so as not to have to face her mocking sadness" (Oz, "Nomad" 28). Similarly: "Geula Sirkin, the surviving child of Zeshka and Dov, wakes up in hatred and rises to wash her face under the cold water faucet" (Oz, "Before" 65). All in all, in the phallocratic domain, Geula is seen only in terms of her marital status and not as an individual. Rightly, Bachur remarks that Geula represents the epitome of loneliness in the Kibbutz (13).

30 Conversely, her late younger brother was proclaimed a legend in the army, promoted to a commander of his own battalion at twenty three. Indeed, even after his death his military exploits are still spoken of with reverence: how he partook in all the reprisal raids, sick with pneumonia blew up an Arab police-station and alone captured a notorious terrorist and six of his crew (Oz, "Before" 66). His few visits to the Kibbutz "[. . .] had been a delight to the unmarried girls. And sometimes to the married girls as well [. . .]. He just burst out laughing and asked why they were all hanging around him, as if they had no homes to go to, as if they had nothing to do" (66)

31 In the course of the tale, the male narrator makes it clear that her solitary state is a situation she is responsible for, namely, spurning his attempts at companionship and rejecting any intimacy: "Sometimes I would rest a conciliatory hand on her neck, and wait for her to calm down. But she never relaxed completely. If once or twice she leaned against me, she always blamed her broken sandal or her aching head. And so we drifted apart" (Oz, "Nomad"

28). Thus, what befalls Geula is the fate of all the unwed literary heroines, who, having discarded wedlock, are left to be scolded and chastised by society. Characteristically, the spinster is also segregated and delineated as different, "Geula is not like the rest of the girls in the Kibbutz" (29). In a similar vein, the youngsters of the Kibbutz maliciously snicker at her nightly walks in the orchards which she takes alone and returns alone – which further compounds the depressed and dejected persona of Geula. It is clear that her status as the social 'other' in the Kibbutz is intensified by the encounter with the Bedouin nomad whom she meets in the orchard while taking one of her nightly walks the Kibbutz.

32 Finding the Bedouin shepherd repulsively attractive (despite being blind in one eye), she sets out to seduce and ensnare him. Accepting his offer of a cigarette, she asks him for another, hoping to prolong the encounter, and wants him to disrobe, excited by the prospect of physical contact, "The girl eyed his desert robe. Aren't you hot in that thing? The man gave an embarrassed, guilty smile [. . .]"(31). She twice repeats his earlier claim that he still young and therefore has no girlfriend,(intimating that she is available) and persists in asking him personal questions. Emboldened by the Arab's compliment that she is beautiful — a compliment, which Avinor argues, is the figment of her imagination (Avinor 263) — she touches his arms hoping for a commensurate reaction.

33 Throughout the encounter, Geula is nervous and thrilled by the potential for a sexual liaison. She smiles at him, and mistakes a narrowing of the eye for a flirtatious wink, "His blind eye narrowed. Geula was momentarily alarmed: surely it was a wink" (32). The young man, however, is not interested in her advances, sustaining the conversation only in an attempt to ingratiate himself to Geula and avoid being reported to the Kibbutz authority for trespassing.

34 As the story draws to a close, it is clear that even the young nomad is disinterested in the old maid: He does reciprocate Geula’s advances, but retreats back to his camp. Geula is left disappointed and humiliated. It should be noted that she is filled with disgust not because he touched her but because the nomad did not touch her.

35 And indeed, the rejection by the nomad brings to the surface all the fallow hatred so patently simmering inside her. Although it is clear that no sexual or physical contact occurred, apart from Geula touching the Bedouin's arm (33), the young woman slowly convinces herself that she was attacked, and behaves as though she was the victim of an attempted rape. Clearly, no incident has taken place. Nevertheless, she devises a more adventurous dénouement befitting her expectation. At this point, her imagination takes such a strong hold of her that the supposed particulars of the attempted rape in the orchard become actual.

Fantasy intermingles with reality. Immediately after he leaves, she begins running in panic as if pursued towards her room, certain that she was attacked: "Give him a kind word, or a smile, and he pounces on you like a wild beast and tries to rape you. It was just as well I ran away from him" (35).

36 No longer able to contain her rage, she schemes to accuse him of a rape he did not commit as revenge for his rejection. Tellingly, at a meeting held to discuss an appropriate response to the nomads' incursion, one of the male members maliciously suggests that Geula desires to be raped by the Bedouins, symbolising her status as a sexual pariah in the Kibbutz: "Hereupon Rami broke in excitedly and asked what I was waiting for. Was I perhaps waiting for some small incident of rape that Geula could write poems about?" (Oz, "Nomad" 37).

37 Here, Oz employs the device of 'mirror inversing' to impress upon the reader that the young goat herder, who is a national outsider, is Geula's doppelgänger. Wilfe maintains that her mastery of brewing coffee equates her with the Bedouins who are experts at this, as well as her walking the fields barefoot (147). Aschkenasy, in an excellent article concerning the concept of Woman as the Double, elaborates: "[. . .] Geula comes to realise that, in a strange way, the Bedouin is her double. Both are outcasts, unattractive and unattached, and both seethe with unfulfilled erotic desires. The recognition that the physically revolting nomad, in his primitive existence, is a reflection of her own raging, uncontrollable self, fills Geula with nausea" (125).

38 Unable to demarcate fiction and reality, the circumstances of the event become so real to her that on the way back to her room, unable to forget her 'ordeal', she vomits and cries in the bushes, exhausted from her 'trauma'-reactions usually associated with real rape victims. Lying in the flowering shrubs, she begins to whisper poems to comfort herself, and is so entranced with her daydream that she is oblivious to the fact that she has blocked a snake's hole, preventing it from returning to its lair. After being bitten, she simply removes the fangs from her skin and remains on the ground, choosing to absorb the venom.

39 In "Nomad and Viper" Oz ups the odds by transmuting the simple tale of an unmarried woman to that of a dangerous woman, who, propelled by her sexual frustration and undesirability is driven to acts of extreme irrationality. The encounter with the nomad, the seduction and the subsequent false 'cry of rape' signify the social construct of single female characters peddled by male fiction. Sadly, Oz refrains from probing the dilemma a woman such as Geula faces being unmarried in a community like a Kibbutz, where the institution of the family is paramount. Instead, he outfits her with the archetypal qualities associated in fiction with the spinster: sour disposition, spite and lasciviousness (Rogers 203). A related

concern is that, as Geula's story is refracted and filtered through a subjective male view, what we are left with is a clichéd take on the life of a single woman- a portrayal that certainly has the ring of the literary stereotype.

40 Oz conjures up a similar image in the short story "Kol Haneharot" ("All The Rivers"[1]) in the shape of its heroine Tova, the sickly poetess, who of all the author's female protagonists is the most grotesque. Here, the narrative lays bare the masculine/feminine bipolar dichotomy, once again, surrendering the narratorial medium to a subjective male voice which ruthlessly disavows female beauty and sexuality, and further reinforces the stereotype of the single woman. On the other hand, the male character is consistently favoured and his masculine virility is showcased, in this instance to exemplify the supposed differences between the male bachelor and the female spinster.

41 Analogously to "Nomad and Viper" the initial introduction to the female protagonist is a not-too-subtle attack and derogation of the character's physique, as typified in the opening passage related by the male hero, Eliezer. It is this passage that initially enables the reader a glimpse into the protagonist's consciousness and alerts us to his attitude and treatment of Tova. It is worth reciting the passage in its entirety:

> Tova, a simple name, a common name, which does not suit a young poetess. The same with her body: too big. Indeed, but only a little. A young woman with the body of a mother [. . .]. There is a surplus of fat in her arms, which is not too say is not soft. The flesh on her arms is in excess [. . .]. Her hair is dull, dark, but not black or brown, but a kind of grey, very dry. Eyes which I can not remember their colour, but I can not forget their parched weariness. Tiny wrinkles encircle her eyes [. . .]. It is not from the eyes that her mocking sadness stems, but certainly from the wrinkles around the eyes [. . .]. Her nose is a little weighty and her mouth betrays loneliness and tenderness [. . .] her forehead is white and arched, too large, as that of a man not a woman, as that of a balding old man [. . .] a strand of hair vertically falls on it trying to cover its bulk, but instead only accentuates its white aridness. Enough, I shall not continue with the excessive paleness of the cheeks. (Oz, "Kol" 255-256)

42 The preceding description typifies the approach taken by the author towards Tova: all the narrative's weirdness attaches to her. She is incessantly denigrated and belittled by Eliezer, who in his recollection of their ephemeral encounter permeates his anecdote with a litany of unkind descriptions concentrating on her grotesque and odd behaviour. Tova is depicted as the 'Other' in the de-Beauvoirian sense, in that she is the stranger, and like the Arab or the nomad, encompasses disgust and seduction (9). And it is certainly true that throughout the story Tova's sickness and unflattering behaviour as the terminable spinster, isolated and desperate for a husband, is foregrounded. In fact, the narrator takes pride in his ability to

[1] All translations from the Hebrew are mine.

engage in a detached and devastating critique of Tova's mien: "I have the power to fearlessly take hold of pincers and extract from Tova's face detail by detail and present it to you with cold accuracy" (Oz, "Kol" 92-93).

43 Conversely, the narrator's self-description relentlessly stresses and magnifies his virility, positing the absurd notion that being a bachelor is diametrically opposed to that of the pathetic unwed female. Here we encounter the inherent structural prejudice in the text. As we are repeatedly reminded, Eliezer is an ideogram of the Israeli macho icon: a decorated war hero, handsome, athletic, intelligent, logical and reasoned: "I am manager of the Kibbutz factory. I was given this responsibility as I am regarded as a practical, energetic man with initiative and imagination. That is, that is what they said in the general meeting in which I chosen. Maybe they took into account my military record in the Sinai war and in 3 military operations" (137). "During the summer I spend my free time in the pool. I achieved some excellent results in this sport. On Saturdays I have a place in the soccer team" (137).

44 Single by choice, he uses women as sex toys, perversely boasting of the time he humiliated a woman who fell in love with him: "I told Tova how once a married woman, older than me, who came to visit her relatives in the Kibbutz, fell in love with me from her first glance. She was ugly as a reptile, I played with her a little, to the enjoyment of all the youngsters, until she left, ashamed of herself" (135).

45 This premier misogynist, without a miasma of compassion, treats the girls with whom he has fleeting sexual relationships as objects. Thus, when one of the women with whom he has had casual affair is emotionally hurt and comes crying, he is unmoved: "No one forced you to come, and no one shed tears so you'll stay" (137). These passages are pivotal in establishing the disparate manner in which both protagonists are presented, and the overt lopsidedness in favour of the single male.

46 Sitting in a Tel-Aviv cafe, Eliezer first notices Tova as a consequence of her ghastly coughing and spitting. Getting up to help her, he strikes up a conversation with this erratic and unpredictable woman. Immediately, she reveals her age, as if to affirm our suspicion that we are indeed dealing with a spinster: "I'm not a girl [. . .]. I am a woman, thirty three years old" (138). Although a poet and a career women, Oz avoids any meaningful exposition of her writing or work, instead choosing to demean her artistic creativity, denuding her of any redeeming attributes. He truncates the beauty in poetic composition by claiming that it is merely a vapid technique which does not involve or demand any inspiration. In fact, Tova likens her work in the advertising industry to that of prostitution: "Tova said that the commercials she draws seem to her like a form of prostitution" (153).

47 Moreover, the sinew-wrenching physical agony that Tova suffers as a result of her smoking is focused upon obsessively and deliberately, so much so that it becomes one of the nodal points of the story, and serves to debase the character and bring to the fore her rebarbative nature. Thus, the narrator often ruptures the flow of events to report her vomiting and sickly face. Also, he admits, that his attraction for her stems from a disfigurement that he finds seductive (a stump in her left finger): "The sight of the defective hand aroused me again. This time it was sharp and explicit" (155). Later, he reveals his true motive in prolonging the encounter with her: "I had a few free hours [. . .] I wanted a little adventure. And that was what happened" (159). The allure in the freakish quotient proffered by this vacuous and miserable artist, and single woman, stands as a metaphor for the other unwed female characters to grace Oz's pages.

48 Not surprisingly, Tova instantly falls in love with Eliezer, a development which is in harmony with the paradigm the author appears to be utilizing for this proverbial single woman. At first she asks him if he is married; and immediately afterwards confesses her love for him, "You're cute [. . .] you know, I love you" (152). The narrator then interpolates another description of his rugged masculinity in order to explain Tova's immediate attraction: "Her behaviour is not logical. I have to justify it [. . .]. I am tall, with wide shoulders my features are regarded as very masculine" (154). Walking towards the beach they meet an acquaintance of Tova, whom informs that Eliezer is her new lover, and on the beach she repeats her earlier declaration of love for him. Overcome by her excitement at finding a man, she without hesitation, proposes a marriage, which Eliezer immediately dismisses: "I don't know I said. It's too early. And besides, you are sick, you are coughing" (152).

49 Faced with another refusal, Tova begins to cry and in a fit of wheezing and coughing vomits on his clothes- a reaction that symbolises her fragile psychic state and sexual frustration. Without saying a further word, Eliezer flees her company, and cleans himself at the showers. The final passage depicting Tova sees a dejected and pathetic figure:

> She cried, quietly. Her voice could not be heard, and her face twisted as the face of a big, ugly baby [. . .]. Suddenly Tova's throat soured and her mouth widened. She bent down and vomited. She vomited, unwaveringly, with energy, in loud wild hiccups. She vomited enthusiastically, eyes closed, and dirtied my clothes. Afterwards, she wiped her mouth with a crumbled handkerchief, clasped in her defective hand (156).

50 Ultimately, Tova is accorded the same misfortune that awaits every spinster at the denouement- abandonment by the man she seeks. Through her antics, Tova is positioned to function as the prototypical old maid — starved for a man, as clearly evinced by her anserine

suggestion of marriage to a stranger and by her efforts to snare Eliezer, who she has been yearning for, with repeated revelations of love.

51 The main inspiration for this essay has been the pivotal literary analysis that originated with Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Milett, critics who saw literature as reflective of collective subjugating male prejudices. As a result, the structure and philosophical agenda of this essay is dominated by the theory of gender binarism and imagery myths, its underpinnings first stated by De Beauvoir in her treatise *The Second Sex*, and eloquently summed up by Pam Morris:

> De Beauvoir points out that a concept of 'otherness' is necessary for organizing human thought. We can acquire a sense of self — of 'me' — only in opposition to what is 'not me' — what is other [. . .]. '[W]oman' functions as the other in the same way which allows men to construct a positive self-identity as masculine. And because what is other does not have identity in its own right, it often acts as an empty space to be ascribed whatever meanings the dominant group chooses. Thus women are frail not strong, emotional not rational, yielding not virile, so that masculinity can be defined as those positive qualities [. . .] by seeing women as other to themselves, as not-men, men can read into 'femininity; whatever qualities are needed to construct their sense of the masculine. So, a mythicised 'Woman' becomes the imaginary location of male dreams, idealizations and fears. (14)

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