

## Being an Immigrant in One's Homeland

The reflection of narratives of immigration in contemporary Israeli literature

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The narrative of Jews' immigration to the Land of Israel is a constitutive narrative in Israeli nationality. The Zionist enterprise, striving to build a haven for the Jews, used to form a positive view of immigration and assimilation, as expressed in a Hebrew word "Aliya" – a special word for describing Jews who immigrated to Israel. "Aliya" means ascent, rise or advancement, all of which are linked to the notion of people returning to their homeland. In reality, however, the immigration process was often the opposite of the optimistic 'Aliya' story. Most waves of immigration were a direct response to currents of anti-Semitism at the origin country, and most immigrants, once in Israel, were repressed and excluded. Often the immigrants suffered an incurable sorrow for their lost homes, friends and culture, unable to see the new land as their home.

In this talk I present the discourse on immigration and homecoming - one of the controversial issues in the production of the national Zionist community. I examine the evolution of the discourse and read the novel of Amos Oz *A Tale of Love and Darkness* within this discussion.

The development of Modern Hebrew literature provides a dramatic example of the production of national imagination, whose construction involves, as Benedict Anderson (1983) had taught us, a writing and rewriting of historical memories and shared narratives that seek to shape the reader's understanding of the nation and its identity. Indeed, since its resurrection at the end of the Nineteenth Century, Modern Hebrew literature has had a significant role in the consolidation of the Zionist enterprise, and the formation of a new national Jewish identity in The Land of Israel.

The Jewish society in Israel in the last one hundred years is an immigrant's society, enjoying an enormous growth rate. At the end of the Ottoman regime (1918) the number of Jews in the land of Israel stood on 56,000. Over the 30 years of the British governance, the Jews' population rose by 11 times. 650,000 Jews lived in Israel in 1948,

at the time of the establishment of the state, and today live in Israel 5 and a half million Jews.

The rate of this growth is obviously a result of the Zionist enterprise. Following the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of the grand historical narrative, Zionism constructed an interpretation of Jewish history from antiquity to the present, marked by its teleological orientation. It constitutes a historical-natural linkage between homecoming and national ethos. (Lomsky-Feder & Rapoport, 2001, 2-3, Zerubavel, 2002, 115)

The Hebrew word 'Aliya', which is a designated word, describes the immigration of Jews to the Land of Israel in terms of an ascent. The origin of the word is religious; it hints at arriving to a holy place (like Jerusalem) and reaching a purity of faith. The Zionist ideology, which uses symbols from the Jewish collective memory, adopted this term and gave it the new notable meaning of building the national home for all the Jews.

Edward Said claimed (1993, XIII) that:

The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative.

Indeed the "Aliya" narrative illustrates Said's words. The 'Aliya' narrative tells the story of Jews who come to Israel following a deep ideological urge and are looking forward to undertaking a major self improvement process that will transform their identity and create a feeling of belonging to their old new historical homeland. Following the goal of creating a new national community, the narrative presents a fixed Jewish-Israeli identity, which everyone should aspire to and accept, following the metaphor of a melting pot which eventually yields a new and homogeneous race of Israeli-Jews. It has been and it is still being expressed and used by the Israeli native hegemony, which tries to employ the Jewish history for the purpose of the creation of a monolithic picture of a certain future.

In the last few decades, however, a debate between Israeli scholars about the concept of 'Aliya' have emerged. Following the critical discourse over nationality, many preferred to give up the designated word 'Aliya' and return to the term immigration, which suggests that Israel operates as an immigration state, and should give place to

diversity of identities and cultures (see for example Kimmerling, 2004). Ronit Matalon, a well known Hebrew women author born to a family of Egyptian-Jews, expresses a critical analysis of the terms. The word Aliya is a:

Clear example for [...] the 'blurry brutality of the Israeli melting pot'. Firstly because these terms hide a grand denial of the situation of immigration [...] at the moment you said "Ole" and not "immigrant" you did two things: you abandoned and denied the inherent forlornness bounded in the situation of immigration, and secondly, you assume that this situation, the situation of 'Aliya' is but the first stage on the way to become something else and somebody else - a person who ultimately belongs to his place. (2001, 47)

The critical attitude towards the term 'Aliya' and the return to the word 'immigration' developed from and within the post-colonial discourse on orientalism (Said, Bhabha, Hall). Yet, although this discourse usually reveals the mechanisms of exclusion of Jews who immigrated from Arab countries (Shenhav, 2003, Shalom-Shitrit, 2004, Haver 2004), it might as well refer to other waves of immigration coming from different cultural communities such as the Jews who came as refugees from Europe after the Holocaust, and were treated badly (Gertz 2004, 2002, Zerubavel 2002).

The 'Aliya' narrative suggested the hegemonial picture of the national ideology, while the 'immigration' narrative, which is the narrative of the margins, reveals the power of hegemony and the mechanisms of suppression and exclusions. It presents the struggle for identity, and the failure of homogenous nationality. This narrative blurs the binarity of natives and immigrants, uncovers the stereotypical description of the immigrant, and gives her a voice.

The relationships between the narrative of 'Aliya' and the narrative of 'immigration' relates to Homi Bhabha's distinction between the Pedagogical and the Performative:

The Pedagogical founds its narrative authority in the tradition of the people [...]. The Performative intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation *self generation* by casting a shadow between the people as 'image' and its signification as a differentiating sight of Self, distinct from the Other and its Outside.(1990, 299)

The split between the Pedagogical narrative - the narrative of the 'Aliya', and the Performative narrative - the narrative of immigration, articulates the struggle over the national collective language. This is a split between the center and the margins, between the hegemony and the ones who suffer from exclusion.

On top of the debate over these two narratives, I would like to go on reading Amoz Oz 2002 novel *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. Amoz Oz, a prominent Israeli author, was born in Jerusalem in 1939 as Amos Klausner, to Zionist right-winged scholars immigrants from East Europe. At the age of twelve, his mother, Fania, committed suicide. Following this loss, he joined Kibbutz Holda, and dramatically switched his political affiliation to become a Labor Zionist. He had also changed his surname to "Oz", a Hebrew word for "strength". After serving in the Israeli Defense Forces, he studied Philosophy and Literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Since the age of 22, Oz has published dozens of books and hundreds of articles. He is involved both in literary and in cultural - political activity, and has gained a national and international recognition. He has been awarded with numerous prizes, among them, Israeli Prize for Literature in 1998, The Frankfurt Peace Prize in 1992, The Goethe Prize in 2005, and the Corine Prize for Lifetime Achievement in 2006. His works have been translated into 30 languages. His book *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, published in 2002, has been translated so far to 16 languages.

Amoz Oz comes from the heart of Israeli hegemony. However, in this autobiographical book, while describing his parents' lives, trying to understand his mother's suicide, and self examining his personal struggle for identity, the split between center and margins, the Pedagogical and the Performative becomes evident. The narrative of the 'Aliya' exists in his book, but behind it stands the narrative of immigration. Hence, this text which comes from the heart of the consensus, from the political and canonical center, expresses the experience of the margins.

The Klausner family was a Russian intelligence middle class family that moved to Odessa and in 1933 immigrated to Israel. His mother's family belonged to the same class, with roots in the Polish romanticism. She came to Israel in 1934 following her parents and sister. Apparently, as Anita Shapira (2005, 164) claims, the two families' move to the

Land of Israel should not have been traumatic. Both families were Zionists, they learned Hebrew in Europe, and they came to Israel with their family members before the Holocaust. However, their new lives in the Israel were a source of disappointment and frustration.

The 'Aliya' narrative is a narrative of homecoming. Yet, in which aspects does the Land of Israel serve as a home for those immigrants?

Lomsky-Feder & Rapoport present the inherent contradiction:

When the homecomer returns to her/his birthplace, that home is deeply seated in her or his autobiographical memory. But when a return home is part of a national movement in which people go back to their ancient land, homecoming is merely a product of historical memory constructed over time spent in diaspora. [...] At first glance, homecoming marks the end of diaspora, yet it is by no means the end of the process of immigration. [...] Like all immigrants, the status of the returning immigrant is marginal relative to those who control power. (Lomsky-Feder & Rapoport, 2001, 2-3. See also Robinson-Divine, 2003; 66, and Gorevitch and Aran, 1993)

Oz parents lived in two worlds of time and place. They lived in Israel but thought about and longed for Europe:

Europe for them was a forbidden promised land, a yearned-for landscape of belfries and squares paved with ancient flagstones, of trams and bridges and church spires, remote village, spa town, forests and snow-covered meadows.

Words like “cottage”, “meadow” or “goose-girl” excited and seduced me all through my childhood. They have a sensual aroma of a genuine, cosy world, far from the dusty tin roofs, the urban wasteland of the scrap iron thistles, the parched hillsides of our Jerusalem, suffocating under the weight of white-hot summer. (2)

Their Identity is split, between what they used to be - their original identity, culture and dreams, and "what they have become" (Hall, 1994; 394). They suffer from poverty, try to hide it in European phony manners; they do not fulfill their career and have to be satisfied with gloomy working places; they cannot get used to the weather and the barren views. They are in exile in the Land of Israel.

Does *A Tale of Love and Darkness* present the marginal narrative of immigration or does it fully support the narrative of "Aliya"? In this book we see the two narratives operate side by side, as I describe below.

In many aspects the text chooses the Performative- the immigration narrative of the margins. Oz's objection to the central narrative expressed in telling his own private story (Milner, 2005, 74). He expropriates the spaces from their national role, and emphasizes their private importance. For example, when describing his aunt Haya's two rooms apartment in Tel-Aviv. He mentions that one room was subleased to some senior commanders, but he ends the paragraph mentioning that "three years later, in the same room, my mother took her own life." (169) (see also Ben-Dov, 2005)

Oz's style confronts the struggle for identity, and does not suggest a linear or teleological narrative. The book is a mosaic of testimonies, letters, documentations, historical surveys, poems and stories, literary criticisms, and fables. It breaks the borders of times and spaces and creates a multivocal experience

From her Stuffy, gloomy, clean and tidy, over-furnished, always shuttered two-room flat in Wessely street in Tel-Aviv [...] Aunt Sonia takes me to visit the mansion in the Wolija quarter in the north-west of Rovno. (150)

This flexibility in time, space, and voices, creates a mode of fluidity. Unlike the 'Aliya' narrative, which demands a disconnection between the old identity and the new one (Zerubavel, 2002, 118), here Oz makes the past a part of the present; he makes Rovno a part of Tel-Aviv.

And finally, the immigration story in this novel is a story of death and mourning. His mother took her life, and she was not the only one. His colorful grandma, who was disgusted by the weather and the microbes in Israel, died after insisting on taking two hot tubs a day, trying helplessly to clean herself. His father, who was an excellent scholar and dreamed of becoming a senior professor, had to work in a library, and this "was like a running sore in my father's soul" (123). While talking to his aunt about Europe she says:

No, I have no desire to go back [Europe] for visit: what for? To start longing again from there to the Land of Israel that no longer exists and may never have existed outside our youthful dreams? To grieve? [...] I sit here in my armchair and grieve several hours a day (189)

Oz presents the death of these people on the one side of an equation. On the other side, the side of the living, he puts the children, the native Israelis, the people, who, like himself, turned their back to their parents:

The children here buried their own parents. All of them. [...]. No parent, no teacher, no neighbour, no uncle [...] and so a well-repressed desire of the Zionist ethos, and of the child that I was then, was miraculously fulfilled: that they should be dead. Because they were so alien, so burdensome. They belong to the Diaspora. [...] only when they are dead will we be able to show them at last how we can do everything ourselves [...] And so at the age of fourteen and a half, a couple of years after my mother's death, I killed my father and the whole of Jerusalem, changes my name, and went on my own to Kibbutz Hulda to live there over the ruins (445)

Oz confessed of taking part in this macabre ritual. Though he did not really killed his father, but only metaphorically, he reveals the violence of the hegemony, which represses a desire for killing everything that looks Diasporic. With the rejection of the national ethos and the presentation of fluid identity, Oz tries in this book to reveal the marginal experience of the immigration

However, the place of Oz within his well known scholarly family and his place in the Israeli Canon, point at certain elements in the book, which are devoted to the national ethos, and thus the 'Aliya' narrative is also well established in the book.

Oz belongs to the center: He masters the language and the culture. He IS the center. He describes the personal immigration story, but tries to link this experience to the national history. This is reflected in the description of his father, which is always analogues to the story of the cousin who decided to stay in Europe

Their elder son, David [...] stayed in Vilna. There at a very early stage, and despite being Jewish, he was appointed to a teaching position at the University [...] there in Vilna he would marry a young woman called Malka, and there, in 1938, his son Daniel would be born, I never saw this son, born a year and a half before me, nor I have ever managed to find a photograph of him. [...] Little

Daniel Klausner would live less than three years. Soon they would come to kill him to protect 'Europe' (101-102)

His father feeling of disappointment and frustration is constantly compared to his uncle's destiny in Europe. Unlike his father, the uncle received academic recognition and fulfilled himself, but all was lost with the holocaust. Oz did not have the opportunity to meet his cousin who was born right before him and murdered with his family by the Nazi's (Porat, 2005). Later in the book, he describes, in length, the General Assembly of united nation, which approved the Partition Plan for creating a state for the Jews in 1947 and the war of independence which followed. In this section of the novel, the author gives a kind of historical documentation which suggests a national justification. The pain and the sorrow, for many who had lost their lives in the holocaust, is replaced with a deep acceptance and reconciliation with the national enterprise.

Oz says that in his book he does not express his own story, but tries to understand "who brought us here. Why we came here. What would have happened if we did not come here" (in Shavit, 2002) He thus chooses to introduce the book within the context of the national narrative (Faige, 2002) and looks at his private autobiographic story as a representation of what Shapira calls: "A scrap from the great drama of the Jewish destiny in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. People that enormous and arbitrary powers had shuck like cloth marionettes, disrupted their life course and set it to a totally different path of which they foresaw" (2005, 166).

In summary, we see that in *A tale of Love and Darkness*, many aspects describe the concrete and the heterogeneous, and thus express the marginal narrative of Immigration. However, when we focus on the text as a representation of Jewish experience in general, it receives a national value, and thus forms a justification for the central Aliya narrative.

"How do we plot the narrative of the nation that must mediate between the teleology of progress tipping over into the 'timeless' discourse of irrationality?" asks Bhabha (1990; 295). It seems that Oz's book integrates the two, combining the teleological "Aliya" story, with the private and painful journey of the immigration.

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