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Memory and space in the autobiographical writings of Amos Oz and Ronit Matalon

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the autobiographical writings of Amos Oz and Ronit Matalon and focuses on *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2002) and *The Sound of Our Steps* (2008). Although the novels differ in terms of era, language, ethnic background, and the gender of the narrator/protagonist, the core plot of mother and child, the spatial concepts of home, garden, and land, and other shared structural elements invite comparison. This reading nevertheless pinpoints their disparity: whereas Oz's own trajectory elicits empathy, redefines the notion of personal life stories and their ideological role in Israeli society, and eventually justifies the Zionist ideology, Matalon's poetics of rupture creates unease that subverts the possibility to voice one's personal story and challenges the national narrative and its validity.

KEYWORDS

Amos Oz; Ronit Matalon; autobiography; motherhood; immigration

Autobiography remains a key literary genre in Modern Hebrew literature and an essential vector integrating individuals into the imagined national community. According to Leigh Gilmore, in Western literature and the history of criticism “the writers whose texts have been used as the base of an argument for what autobiography is form a set of ‘exemplary’ literary, political, and military men; they have been seen as singular figures capable of summing up an era in a name: Augustine, Rousseau, Franklin, Henry Adams.”¹ These “exemplary” individuals are always the ambassadors of a social structure, and are considered role models for society and its ideal values and norms. In Hebrew literature, Tamar S. Hess noted that from the Haskalah period onward, from Moshe Leib Lilienblum, who “carried his autobiographical self through the hopes of the Enlightenment until he embraced the Zionist cause,”² Hebrew autobiographies have depicted the national (masculine) model. These autobiographies, while dealing with the life of individuals, played an important role in the renaissance of the new Hebrew culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They captured the shifting spirit and soul of Jewish and Israeli nationality, and championed the notion that “in national literatures the individual self is generally defined as both particular and universally representative.”³

In the 1970s, Philippe Lejeune defined autobiographical writing as an “Autobiographical Pact,” a contract between the reader and writer “which reflects an understanding by the reader that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are the same person.”⁴ This pact is based on declared and stable concepts of identity. Many classical autobiographies describe

the coming-of-age process of the protagonist toward his successful adulthood, which anchors the adult's stable identity and personality within society and nation.

However, as Leigh Gilmore has shown, Lejeune's notion that autobiography takes "a rational and representative 'I' at its center" has been challenged.⁵ The development of gender, ethnic, and feminist theories in Western literature and criticism, from the 1960s onward, has led to new readings of autobiographies that examine the sociopolitical power of placing the "I" (as a woman or as a minority) as the focal point of the text. Feminist intellectuals such as Julia Kristeva (*Desire in Language*), Helene Cixous ("The Laugh of the Medusa") and Luce Irigaray (*This Sex Which Is Not One*) along with poststructuralist theorists such as Paul de Man (*Allegories of Reading*) and Roland Barthes ("The Death of the Author") have paved the way for new variants on autobiographical texts where textual gaps, silences, and incoherencies in terms of linearity and causality are not only accepted but are vaunted.⁶ Today, autobiography is perceived as a literary genre that is "virtually impossible" to define, and which includes many forms and directions.⁷

In contemporary Israeli society, which, as Eran Kaplan suggests, "no longer accepts a single hegemonic group or set of images as the only representative of its collective identity,"⁸ autobiography has remained a major genre whose literary contours are often indicative of the shape of modern Israeli culture.⁹ Paralleling the widening fissures in efforts to consolidate a homogeneous Jewish-Israeli culture, autobiographies or autobiographic novels have taken on a variety of attributes, as exemplified in Haim Be'er's *Havalim* (The Pure Element of Time, 1998), Aharon Appelfeld's *Sipur haim* (The Story of a Life, 1999), Amos Oz's *Sipur al ahava ve-hoshekh* (A Tale of Love and Darkness, 2002), Dan Tsalka's *Sefer ha-alef bet* (Alphabet Book, 2003), and Yoram Kaniuk's *Tashah* (1948, 2010). Although most of these authors are members of the cultural Ashkenazi elite in Israel, enjoy national acclaim, and in many respects are "exemplary" individuals, they have opted to distance themselves from the national story and write autobiographies that "produc[e] marginal subjects."¹⁰ These autobiographies focus on identities in collision and aim to (re) define the Israeli self. Several women have also written autobiographies, including Netiva Ben-Yehuda's *The Palmah Trilogy* (1981, 1985, 1991) and Alona Frankel's *Yalda* (Girl, 2004). Mizrahi autobiography appeared more recently with Shimon Balas' *Beguf rishon* (In the First Person, 2009), the first Iraqi-born novelist to publish a memoir. Female Mizrahi writers made a dramatic entry into the Israeli autobiographical scene with Ronit Matalon's *Kol tze'adenu* (The Sound of Our Steps, 2008) and Orly Castel Bloom's *Ha-roman ha-mitzri* (The Egyptian, 2015).

These examples and many others show that Israeli literary autobiographies, autobiographic novels, or auto-fiction¹¹ writing are, in fact, hybrid genres. They not only shun the mono-national narrative, but also upend memory, history, and the poetics of narration. These texts often engage in a "basic tension between memory and the forgotten,"¹² and constitute an "oxymoronic amalgamation" of the authentic and the fictional, the prosaic and the poetic, documentation and invention.¹³

In the fifth chapter of Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, in a literary aside that was not included in the English translation, Oz (1939–2018) makes the provocative statement that "every story that I have written is autobiographical."¹⁴ He orients his stories and novels toward an identification of the sources of the plot, the characters, and their backgrounds, and hints that autobiographical moments, thoughts, and traumas are the kernel of his narratives. He also charts out the path "good readers" should follow:

readers should not be driven by voyeurism or the search for salacious tidbits but rather by empathy, which should prompt them to compare the dark labyrinths and monsters in the story to the labyrinths and monsters in their own lives. However, Oz knew that readers would be fascinated by *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, in which he openly and intimately talks about himself in the first person, and would consider it to be a key to his entire oeuvre, the wellsprings of his talent, and his deepest motivations for writing.

These declarations in the fifth chapter ground Oz's project not only thematically but also in terms of tone. Throughout the novel, he addresses the reader directly in two voices. The first is the voice of the boy who lost his mother when he was 12, who goes through identity crises but scaffolds himself out of the trauma, thus annealing empathy. The other is the voice of the narrator as an white-authoritative-male-adult, who is not only a symbol of "ha-Israeli ha-yafe" (the nice Israeli) but also the person who nurtured it,¹⁵ who, from this position, can explain "[...] who brought us here. Why we came here. What would have happened if we had not come here."¹⁶ My contention is that this intermixing of empathy and authoritative voices is the core of Oz's text and has played a crucial role in its success.

Unlike Oz, Ronit Matalon (1959–2017), a Mizrahi female author, insisted that her novel *The Sound of Our Steps* was not autobiographical, to the extent of subtitling it "a novel." It describes the lives of Lucette and her three children, who live in an immigrant neighborhood near Tel-Aviv during the 1950s. Both readers and reviewers have pointed to the parallels between Matalon's text and her life.¹⁷ A number of episodes, as well as the setting for the book, appeared in her collection of essays *Kro u-khtov* (Read and Write), which was published in 2001, where she describes her childhood and adolescence in the Ganei Tikva neighborhood, which was built in the 1950s to settle immigrants from Muslim countries (North Africa, Iraq, and Yemen) as well as Poland and Romania.¹⁸ The descriptions of the house and its surroundings in *The Sound of Our Steps* (although not mentioned by name), the poverty and lack of basic infrastructure, and the specific references to the nearby affluent neighborhood of Savion are very similar to those found in *Read and Write*, which strongly suggest that the novel depicts this space.¹⁹ Other similarities include the descriptions of her family members who emigrated from Cairo to Israel, and specifically the character of Matalon's father, an educated Jewish-Egyptian who wrote political articles in Hebrew, French, and Arabic (146, 294), and the portrayals of his ideological and political circle (88). In the novel, Maurice, Lucette's husband, is also a political activist dedicated to fighting the Ashkenazi establishment's discrimination of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews, while abandoning his responsibility for his family.

Matalon does not use actual names in the novel,²⁰ and while she did not link the novel to her life in the Hebrew media, she admitted to the foreign press that the novel was actually about her mother and her childhood:

I never wrote as much about my mother before *Kol tz'adenu*. I think writing about my mother changed my style of writing, my image of the world. [...] Her physical features are fragmented throughout the book. [...] I was only preoccupied with my memories.²¹

In her collection of essays, *Ad argi'ah* (Only Fleeting, 2018), published after her death, Matalon refers to memory and autobiography and relates to the novel. She describes the beginnings of her writing as a transition from the first person to the third person (from "I" to "She") and the moment when part of herself became able to see things from the

outside. When questioned as to the veracity of her stories, she admitted that she chose the “childish eagerness and ability to be in the twilight zone between imagination and reality, true and what may have been true.”²² Na’ama Tsal suggests that the epigraph of the novel, a quote from T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets” may signal Matalon’s narrating voice that merges “what might have been” and “what has been.”²³

Matalon’s writing is perhaps best situated in the current literary discourse, which views autobiographical writing as a way to understand the colonial subject and give a voice to the silenced subject.²⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” argued that the subaltern has no history and thus cannot speak. However, in her later writings, Spivak admitted that the culture of confession and testimony is a major technique of “giving witness to oppression.”²⁵ This is what Matalon does when she focuses on her childhood home and family. It is not a story of coming of age told from the standpoint of a successful adult, but a story that reveals an unstable identity that still has the scars of oppression. Thus, Matalon locates herself both in the first person and third person and preserves the gap between them. She constitutes a radically different persona than Oz: she does not let her reader be carried away by her narrative since she constantly instills doubt as to its reliability and relinquishes the role of the omniscient author.

Motherhood and the trauma of immigration

The childhood memories of Oz and Matalon differ in terms of time, place, language, and context. Nevertheless, the trauma of immigration is present at the kernel of their autobiographical writing. The mother figure hovers over the narrative and exemplifies their great loss. Several spatial concepts that appear in both texts such as the home, garden, and their complex meanings, make a comparative reading possible. Contrasting with these similarities, the differences between the texts stand out even more starkly.

In her essay “Mi-hutz la-makom, be-tokh ha-zman” (Out of Place, Inside Time), Matalon writes about immigration as follows:

Until recently, only a few writers on the fringes of society dared utter the term “immigrant” rather than the Zionist “oleh,” as a subversive act of defiance. I believe that the instance in which the word “immigrant” finally and completely replaced the word “oleh” constitutes an important moment [...] Saying “oleh” rather than immigrant [...] annuls and denies the inherent wretchedness inherent to the process of immigration, and presupposes that this state is only a phase on the way towards something else; namely, absolute assimilation.²⁶

Matalon is centering on the ideological clash between *aliyah* and immigration (*hagira*). The origin of the Hebrew word *aliyah* is religious: it suggests going to a holy site (such as Jerusalem) and affirming one’s faith. Zionist ideology, which drew on symbols from Jewish collective memory, adapted this term and gave it the new meaning of building a national home for all the Jews. The new narrative of the Zionist *aliyah* tells the story of Jews who come to Israel out of ideological yearning, and are prepared to undergo a radical transformation that will alter their identity and create a sense of belonging to their “AltNeu” historical homeland, as Theodor Herzl so aptly put it in his 1902 book [*Altneuland: The Old New Land*]. The success of this process is grounded in the acceptance and assimilation of a new and homogeneous

prototype of Israeli Jew emerging from the production and construction of the national imagination.²⁷

The tension between *aliyah* and *immigration* can be formulated in a more abstract conceptual model. Homi Bhabha's distinction between the pedagogical and the performative is a useful starting point:

The pedagogical founds its narrative authority on the tradition of the people [...]. The performative intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation's 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.²⁸

From this more general perspective, *aliyah* reflects a hegemonic picture of national ideology. It forms a pedagogical narrative of Zionist thought and education that defines the successful enterprise of settling in Palestine and building a new society. The *immigration* narrative is a specific realization of this general idea. Specific individual immigration recognizes the struggle for identity, the failure of the attempt to impose a homogenous nationality, and the ensuing trauma.²⁹ However, must the pedagogical and the performative always point in two opposite directions?

Oz's book reveals the trauma of an entire generation whose lives were so often uprooted. His personal story is also a collective one in terms of key national moments relating to a certain time, spaces, and history.³⁰ Oz combines his personal story with what Michael Feige claims to be "objective history" – the hegemony of the national context,³¹ so that his work demonstrates that the performative and the pedagogical (in Bhabha's terms) can operate together. This combination is what has given the novel its cult status, as Yigal Schwartz has shown.³²

To construct his personal story, Oz's poetics emphasize a particular and concrete space, and the work breaks the linear, causal, mono-dimensional fabula by expressing a pluralized and provisional narrative. The identity of the immigrant is composed of memories constructed over a continuum of time. *A Tale of Love and Darkness* is not a one-dimensional narrative; it is interspersed with testimonies, documents, postcards, poems, notes, literary criticism, memoirs written by members of the family, old newspapers, and stories, all of which deviate from one clear voice to create a chorus. The text is constructed as a collection of episodes and there is no single answer to the question of belonging and identity which is so central to the narrative. Even though the book is autobiographical, it deliberately blurs the distinction between facts, historical truth, and fiction. His mother's stories and the spaces they suggest penetrate Oz's story and impede the act of reconstruction. This bending of time, space, and voices creates fluidity in relation to the personal story.

Oz details the intimate story of the irrevocable damage caused by his family's immigration, which eventually led to his mother's suicide. The Zionist establishment demanded that immigrants cut themselves off from their diaspora home and forget their previous identities, language, memories, and culture.³³ In reality, however, the situation was different, and Oz portrays this bluntly by showing how his parents, like many others, felt uprooted and lived in two different times and places. They lived in Israel but thought about, and longed for, Europe, "a forbidden promised land [...] 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).³⁴

Oz's family came to Israel filled with dreams and hopes, quoting the song "all our hopes will be fulfilled/There to live in liberty, there to flourish, pure and free" (242). They

underwent a painful split between what they used to be and “what they have become,”³⁵ between who they were, what they expected to be, and their lives in Israel. The Klausner family was part of the Russian middle-class intelligentsia that moved to Odessa and in 1933 immigrated to Israel. His father studied history and literature and hoped to become a professor of comparative literature, but ended up working for most of his life as a librarian in the Jewish National and Hebrew University Library. His mother’s family belonged to the same milieu. Fania grew up in Rovno (then in Poland, today in Ukraine) and studied history and philosophy in Prague. She abandoned her academic career to go to Israel in 1934, where her parents and sister had already settled. Anita Shapira states that “the two families’ move to Palestine should not have been traumatic; both families were Zionists, they had learned Hebrew in Europe and they went to Israel with their family members before the Holocaust.”³⁶ However, the neighborhood of Kerem Abraham “suited neither of them” (288–289), and “Hebrew was still not a natural enough language, it was certainly not an intimate language, and it was hard to know what exactly came out when they spoke it” (11).

Oz’s immigration story in the novel is about death and mourning, parents’ love, and orphanhood. It is the story of his colorful grandmother, who was disgusted with the weather and the dirt in Israel and died after insisting on taking two hot baths a day in a vain attempt to keep clean. It is also the story of his father, whose dream of a professorship “was like a running sore in my father’s soul” (123). But above all, it is the story of Oz’s mother’s suicide.

What did she hope to find here, what did she find and did she not find? What did Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem look like to someone who had grown up in a mansion in Rovno and arrived straight from the Gothic beauty of Prague? [...] By the time I reached the age when my mother could have told me about her childhood and her early days in the Land, her mind was elsewhere [...] The bedtime stories she told me were peopled by giants, fairies, witches. (181-2)

Oz is fascinated by the character of his mother, who remained an unsolved mystery. In an attempt to understand her, he collects testimonies from others but also tries to recall what he remembers, her movements and words. Sonia, Fania’s sister, describes their reunion when Sonia came to Israel. Fania was a few months pregnant then, but she was already “very pale and was even more silent than usual” and her “forehead seemed sort of clouded” (191). This silence and paleness also correspond to Oz’s description of what he remembered. Oz recalls her hands and softness when she helped him put on his first pair of shoes (210). Later, he chronicled her activities: when she sat down, what she did, what she read. His finely-hewn portrayal of his mother underscores her mental and psychological deterioration: she immersed herself in reading “she read every evening, while I played outside [...] she also read after the supper things were washed up, she read while my father and I sat together at his desk” (264), “From morning to evening she sat in a deck chair [...] and read” (265). Later he noticed that “A slowness had started making itself felt in her movements [...] she has stopped giving private history and literature lessons” (383). Two years before she died she began to suffer from migraines and “had to cut down on the housework” (385) and “[b]y the end of the winter she had almost stopped eating” (389). She “couldn’t stand the electric light. Every evening she would sit in the dark” (387) and “In the autumn, towards the end of 1951, my mother’s condition took another turn for the worse. [...] she sat all day at the window counting the birds or

the clouds. She sat there at night too, with her eyes wide open” (428). She gradually alienates herself from the world, as well as from her family; she stands by the window and stares outside or lies on her back “with her open eyes fixed” (383). Except for the shoes scene, when he was a baby, she is never described in relation to Oz, and her gaze is never directed toward him.

Fania tells stories of an imaginary Europe with legendary spaces inhabited by unreal characters. In his gentle description of her activities, Oz almost turns her into a character in one of her fairytales. Her weakness and remoteness and her bizarre behavior make her seem unreal in the novel, as though she were a kind of ghost. She is like an angel who could not survive in the real world: “my mother grew up surrounded by an angelic cultural vision of misty beauty whose wings were finally dashed on the hot dusty pavement of Jerusalem stone” (207).

Oz paints his parents and particularly his mother as victims of circumstance. Those who came to Israel suffered from an alienation that ruined them, but the branches of the family who stayed in Europe were exterminated in the Holocaust. This personal and historical picture nurtured a position that is often inherent to the Zionist narrative and is frequently expressed in the form of “victim-community,” to use Martin Jaffe’s terminology.³⁷ Oz’s mother is the ultimate victim here, and her description as an angel or ghost is highly stirring and emotional. She is a symbol, a myth, almost a martyr, who pays the price for the national resurrection. The end of the novel narrates Fania’s last hours. This is a condensed trauma for the child who lost his mother, a trauma that was known to the reader from the beginning of the novel but is actualized in the final pages when Oz calls to his mother and begs her not to kill herself. This end constitutes the closure.

Schwartz’s analysis of the massive responses of readers to the novel documents the highly emotional reactions it elicited, from laughter and crying to feelings of catharsis. Above all, readers related to the text as though it were their own stories and often described their own family histories in the long letters they wrote to Oz.³⁸ They reacted to this personal story as though it reflected general history. Thus, even though the work ends with a very personal scene, the acknowledgment of the suffering and the empathetic reaction of this traumatic fascinating literary plot support the national endeavor and the price it demanded.

By contrast, Schwartz argues that Matalon’s success is due to the fact that “Matalon adopted [...] the main survival strategy of the hegemonic establishment [...] the presentation of the personal, familial, and sectorial story of the author as if it were a collective and universal story.”³⁹ He suggests that Matalon worked within the same hegemonic platform (as did Oz and others) and therefore deserves her place in the literary canon. However, Schwartz admits that this is only a deceptive technique that allows her to take a subversive position.

As in Oz’s works, Matalon’s text testifies to the trauma of immigration, and its impact on her mother’s personality. She says that “Immigration, whether perceived as a temporary or chronic evil, almost always represents a state of a fracture or a wound. Not belonging is a wound,”⁴⁰ and depicts how Lucette, who grew up a “lady” (she did not work, she did not clean or cook), is defeated by the new homeland that changes her entire life, turns her into a working woman, and breaks her spirit.

The collapse of the authoritarian father figure in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s in many Mizrahi immigrant families created a vacuum and forced women to enter the public

sphere. As the head of the family, fathers had the final word on everyone's affairs but were often unable to find work or support their families. The breakdown of traditional familial patterns often placed women in a new position. Not only did they continue to be responsible for cooking and caring for the whole family, but had to join the struggle to stay afloat, work outside the home, and find other ways of feeding the family and raising the children.⁴¹ However, this shift from the domestic to the public sphere did not result in liberation from gender oppression. Rather, going to work outside the home and traveling to affluent neighborhoods did not make these women part of the hegemonic space. Most of them remained in the margins.

Matalon's text presents a finely-tuned description of her mother's appearance, job skills, attitude toward her children, life story, and relations with her husband. It starts with the sound of her mother's steps as she returns home after a long day of physical labor: "The sound of her steps: not the heels tapping, the feet dragging, the clogs clattering or soles shuffling on the path leading to the house, no" (1). Her mother's body is described as bent and lolling, with her "skirt with the broken zipper" and "her overflowing stomach" (8).

As in Oz's novel, Matalon also observes her mother, whom she sees as enigmatic. Although like Fania she sometimes escapes her hard life through fantasy and rereads Alexandre Dumas' novel *La dame aux Camélias*, which is integrated into the novel as the symbol of a heroine who sacrifices herself for love (68),⁴² she is mostly very unemotional and pragmatic. Lucette never shows gentle emotions or complains but what she does not utter out loud is reflected in her body, the soles of her feet, and the palms of her hands, to which the narrator devotes long pages. Her body tells the true story that "femininity had been sacrificed to this rough place" (17). With no words and language to reflect the hardships of her life, she often takes on manly, aggressive behavior: "the shack didn't have a man in it, so she became the man" (94). When she gets back home, she checks to see whether the house is neat, and if it is less than perfect she reacts violently, smashes cups and vases, throws shoes, and strikes her children.

The violence she expresses toward the prefab and her children is also directed at her own body: "Between me and my sister stretched a train of dead children [...] 'I got rid of them, I got rid of them like kittens and ran to work' she said as if to herself" (30). The girl in the story learns that her mother did not want to have any more children and planned to "get rid of her" as she did with her previous pregnancies. She was saved by her grandmother who had a fateful dream and begs her daughter not to have an abortion. The two reach an agreement that the grandmother will raise "the girl."

However, this aggression has another facet in that the novel reveals the mother as the defender of her children. When the rabbi of Savion, where she works as a cleaning lady, wants to adopt "the girl", the mother refuses: "whatever happens, we don't do that, we don't give away our children" (138). The rabbi is the hegemonic patron who wants to "protect" the young child from an apparently unqualified (primitive) mother and life on the fringes of society.

Yochai Oppenheimer's writings about the Mizrahi body in Israeli fiction suggest that Mizrahi literature deconstructs physical identity which is often represented as a binary structure where the Ashkenazi Sabra, who is manly, strong and healthy is pitted against the diasporic Jew and his feminine, weak, and vulnerable body.⁴³ Matalon does not hide these defective bodies or beautify them. Organs are described intimately and intrusively

by revealing every wrinkle, every lump of fat. These unflattering physical descriptions intensify the chasm in her mother's life between her former persona, the daughter of an affluent educated family from Egypt, capable of cultured conversation and activity, and her Israeli life as a down-and-out, inarticulate woman, who cleans houses. Thus, Matalon subverts the hegemonic concept of the body by her refusal to hide it and reveals the real scars of immigration.

Oz and Matalon voice the pain of their mothers and express what Cathy Caruth calls "the plea of an other who is asking to be seen and heard, this call by which the other commends us to awaken."⁴⁴ They also reveal the impact of the suffering of immigration on their lives as children who were born in Israel, thus exposing one of the primal traumas of Israeli society. However, Lucette's extreme physicality is completely unlike Fania's fantastic embodiment. Matalon courageously exposes the violence of immigration on a person who not only experienced a fractured life but has also had to confront discrimination as a Mizrahi woman. She illustrates the physical cost of her mother's survival. Unlike Oz, who describes his mother with great empathy by disclosing her sense of the impossibility of her life which eventually leads her to abandon it all, Lucette is not a lovely character or an ultimate victim. She is less gentle and not pretty: she is fat and aggressive toward her children, but stubbornly refuses to hand over her child to a foster family, whereas Fania sinks into depression and is unable to be a mother. Matalon describes an alternative to the emotional depiction nurtured by Oz. Instead of silent cooperation with the national project through the moving story of the mother as a symbol or a martyr, Matalon crushes any attempt to turn her mother into a myth. Instead of empathy, she chooses what Dominick LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement."

Empathy is the ability to think or feel with another person and simulate the experiences of others. Since the eighteenth, and to a greater extent in the nineteenth, century empathy has been seen as one of the pillars of social behavior, and in terms of ethics, is viewed as enabling a better understanding of the suffering of others. In literature, empathy is thought to enable the reader's emotional engagement with the perspectives of others, which may encourage the growth of humanistic values.⁴⁵ However, postmodern criticism and ethics have tended to question the power of empathy and its educational effect. One of the reservations is that the concept of empathy draws on an hypothesis of universality that assumes that people have shared experiences that enable assimilation and understanding. This hypothesis does not necessarily work when literature discusses different times and cultures. People may believe that they feel or understand the other while actually appropriating others to their own self. The second reservation has to do with the emotional effect of empathy that can work in different directions while manipulating the reader.⁴⁶

LaCapra's assessment of trauma argues that while empathy is "important in attempting to understand a traumatic event [...] it may have stylistic effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems."⁴⁷ LaCapra claims that empathy may tap into the pleasure principle since one of its components involves achieving empathy by reaching some kind of harmony.⁴⁸ Instead, LaCapra puts forward the concept of "empathic unsettlement," which constitutes a barrier,⁴⁹ since it allows for certain types of empathy to emerge, but still maintains distance and does not seek resolution, harmony, or closure.⁵⁰

LaCapra's distinction suggests where Oz's and Matalon's texts diverge. Oz is telling a personal story which is also the national story and has the readers' full engagement

and may generate catharsis. This catharsis is of course not necessarily negative, and in the case of Oz it is part of the artistic achievement of the novel. However, it leads the reader to validate the Zionist enterprise since it makes it clear why this suffering was inevitable, and thus enables closure. Unlike Oz, Matalon's narrative of immigration has no "happy end" or "final destination,"⁵¹ with no saints or martyrs and no harmony. This unsettlement is the main arsenal in Matalon's strategy of confronting the teleological national story.

Home, garden, and the disputed land

When Gaston Bachelard defined the home as an individual's "corner of the world," or primary universe, he was underscoring the extent to which the home plays a crucial, powerful role in crystallizing people's thoughts, memories, and dreams.⁵² The notion of "home" relates not only to a dwelling place but also to a birthplace that creates an intimate relationship between people who live together.

A person's home is the "small place" (or "a place") to use Zeli Gurevitz and Giddeon Aran's terminology and from there circles of places of belonging fan out to the neighborhood, the city, and the country. The national home, the Land of Israel, is the "big place" ("the place"). Gurevitz and Aran claim that there is no continuum between "a place" and "the place," but rather a dialogue "between a contemporary, local and close reality of life and an idea,"⁵³ an imagined place that is a product of historical memory.⁵⁴

The formulation of the national space was concretized in the Zionist narrative of the early twentieth century in communal settings such as the moshava and the kibbutz, but also in natural landscapes such as mountains, valleys, and orchards. This Zionist work aimed at forming a physical bond to the place, through working the land, the ability to make a living from manual labor, and infiltrating open spaces.⁵⁵ The image of the Sabra in Hebrew literature was constructed in open spaces: Alik and Uri, Moshe Shamir's characters, are never described in their homes. They are always outside, on a horse, in the yard, in the vegetable garden, in the plum orchard or the pine forests, near the irrigation channels.⁵⁶ However, this formation of the new person on the new land completely ignored the people who have long been on the land – the Palestinians.

Yigal Schwartz's examination of the Hebrew literature in the last 150 years shows that the growth of secular nationalism, as depicted in descriptions of landscapes and people's affinity to space, can be characterized as a relationship between "the engineering of man" and "the thought of space." He argues that Hebrew literature is based on a spatial momentum that stems from a "vector of passion" that channels the passion from the Diaspora to the Land of Israel but also severs emotional and mental existence from the body and corporality. Yehuda Halevi's poetization "my heart is in the East and I in the uttermost West" best manifests this trait⁵⁷ by expressing the unbridgeable gap between the heart and the body – between "a place" and "the place."

This nexus was integrated into the meta-narrative of Hebrew culture from the outset. Initially, these models constituted attempts to erase the gap between "a place" and "the place,"⁵⁸ since part of the vision of reaching the promised land was to unite the two – a vision that failed. The literature of the 1960s onwards has not only made peace with the heart/body dichotomy but has also fashioned the vector of passion into an inverted

duplication of the Diaspora where we are in the East but our heart is in the West. Thus, the literature of this generation

reflected, but even more so, designed the very essence of what it is to be an Israeli – it reversed the direction of the vector of passion that ruled Zionist literature, and thus grounded our statutes [...] at the very moment we achieved sovereignty, after two thousand years in the diaspora, as ‘immigrants in our country.’⁵⁹

Oz and Matalon chart this reverse direction of the vector of passion by unveiling the deceptiveness of the national place. They focus on alternative homes that underscore and negate the Zionist conceptualization of space and thus expose the schism between the personal home and the national home, and between the reality of life and the ideal image. Moreover, they also bring back the Palestinians, who were removed from this formation of the Zionist place.

Oz’s “structure of the scenery of the homeland lies far from the objective intended by the formulators of the Zionist ethos,” Iris Milner argues,⁶⁰ in that he expropriates spaces from their national role and emphasizes their personal importance.⁶¹ Oz’s childhood home was cramped and dark. It measured no more than 30 square meters and was made up of two rooms, a sofa, a large library, and a tiny green room with a closet. A corridor apartment: “A narrow, low passage, dark and slightly curved, like an escape tunnel from a prison, linked the little kitchenette and toilet to these two small rooms” (1). The light is always pale and the windows were closed: “Through a tiny opening high up in their back walls the kitchenette and toilet peered out into a little prison yard [...] where a pale geranium planted in a dusty olive can was gradually dying for want of a single ray of sunlight.” (1). The kitchen was “narrow and low as a solitary confinement cell” (261) and every evening there was a ceremony that closed off the family from the world, where “[t]he whole outside world was locked out, and inside our armored cabin [...] the whole flat was sealed off every evening and slowly sank, like a submarine, beneath the surface of the winter” (286).

Oz’s childhood home is a prison. It is a closed structure that needs to be barricaded off from intruders. This is, in essence, a diasporic home, a reinforced cell located in a hostile environment, exposed to the winds, to danger, and to the voices of the outside world. In wartime, the house is used as an air-raid shelter, and the neighbors go down to the basement apartment to find protection, but Oz’s story clearly shows that danger comes not only from the outside but also from the inside.

Oz’s home is a metonymic for his mother and her feelings. “Even during the day the corridor was pitch black, unless you switched the light on. In the black my mother floated to and fro, unvaryingly [...] as prisoners wailed round their prison yard” (343). His mother cannot stand the light, and her feeling of imprisonment and despair are encapsulated in the space where “a thousand dark years separated everyone. Even three prisoners in a cell” (437).

Across the threshold, when the locks are removed, attempts are made to connect with the Israeli space. The tie to the Land of Israel is to the soil, and the Zionist connection to the soil means “making the desert bloom.” In Oz’s work, the contact with the land is reduced to a tiny yard in which the protagonists make strenuous efforts to fulfill the most important of all Zionist missions, getting a plant to emerge from the soil.

“The garden wasn’t a real garden, just a smallish rectangle of trampled earth as hard as concrete, where even thistles could scarcely grow” (225). Nevertheless, father and son

want to be farmers and grow a vegetable garden: “we’ll make a little kibbutz in the space by the pomegranate tree, and bring forth bread from the earth by our own efforts!” (226).

Oz’s father aspires to make his own “desert” bloom. Nurit Gertz points out that Oz’s description hones in on the stages of agricultural effort and the continuation of the struggle as he fights the elements and the primal wilderness, while his son is entrusted with the mission of joining the charging ranks of soldiers.⁶² Although the father’s tenaciousness likens him to David resisting the Philistine Goliath, and “although he borrows from the library a book about gardening and vegetable growing” (232) and is eager to find a cure, the dying seedlings dry up in the yard, “the saplings bowed their heads, and once more started looking as sickly and weak as persecuted diaspora Jews, their leaves dropped, the shoots withered” (233). The attempt to revive Israeli soil fails.

Who, nevertheless, is able to make the desert bloom? The pioneers and the members of the kibbutzim, who will always be “beyond our horizon” (5). As Oz constantly states: “Somewhere, over the hills and far away. A new breed of heroic Jews was springing up” (4). While the pioneers are out of sight, Oz identifies others who know the secret of the land – the Palestinians. One example is the lavish home with its thriving yard where a “respectable European family,” the El-Siluanys, live: “It was surrounded by a thick stone wall that concealed the orchard shady with vines and fruit trees. My astonished eyes looked instinctively for the tree of life and the tree of knowledge” (300). Oz sees the coveted amalgamation of the Israeli bond to the land and to European education and manners in the Arab family. There and only there do the trees of the Garden of Eden grow. However, in his efforts to impress the Palestinian children, when visiting the house with his uncle, he tries to prove to them that he is not part of a “pitiful nation, a nation of crouched scholars, weak moths flying from every shadow” (372). He loses control of an iron ball he is trying to swing by its chain, and the iron ball flies loose and crushes the foot of the family’s son. Later in the novel, he continues to think about the Palestinian family listening to the radio when the United Nations’ 1947 resolution is announced and imagines what happened to them during and after the War of Independence.

Oz does not ignore the Palestinians or their links to the land but adopts an orientalist gaze both in the description of the El-Siluanys home and family (300–305) and toward the Arab who discovers him hiding in a clothing store, with his “warm cheek and pleasant grey stubble [...] like a kind-hearted, elderly carpenter, a sort of Gepetto” (332), whom he remembers with longing. They are described as warm people, close to nature, living a peaceful life with extended families and many children. The episode in the El-Siluanys home with the iron ball is certainly part of Oz’s acknowledgment of Jewish cruelty and insensitivity to the Palestinians and their suffering, but when he comes to formulating the Jewish-Arab conflict and interpreting it, he is drawn again to Jewish victimhood: “In the lives of individuals and of people, too, the worst conflicts are often those that break out between those who are persecuted” (330).

According to Oz, both the Jews and the Arabs suffered oppression originating in Europe that caused trauma on both sides. “When the Arabs look at us they see not a bunch of half-hysterical survivors but a new offshoot of Europe, with its colonialism, technical sophistication and exploitation, that had cleverly returned to the Middle East – in Zionist guise this time – to exploit, evict and oppress all over again” (330). When the Jews look at the Arabs they “do not see the fellow victims either, brothers in adversity, but somehow we see pogrom-making Cossacks, bloodthirsty anti-Semites, Nazis in disguise”

(330). Jews and Arabs are like siblings (Isaac and Ishmael in the Bible) who have a common abusive father but instead of uniting and amassing a common strength, they fight each other.

Oz attempted to understand the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by proposing a highly appealing psychological explanation for the behavior of the two nations. However, by positioning Jews and Arabs as two counterparts who are equal he denies the Palestinian tragedy and Israeli responsibility. Oz's discussion of the land and the conflict brings both the empathetic vision and the authoritative voice to the fore. He relates to the Jewish people as "a bunch of half-hysterical survivors" who continue to nurture their victimhood, a position which, as Raz Yosef has noted, "refrain[s] from dealing with the question of responsibility for the injustices."⁶³ Furthermore, he adopts the paternalistic stance of the friendly therapist advising these two nations to address their suffering as psychological distress and suggests a resolution.⁶⁴

Unlike Oz's orientalism and paternalistic approach, Matalon's version has what Karen Grumberg has called "subversive spatiality" (200), where she uses spatial contexts to depict circumstances that are unsettling and their ensuing instability. Clearly, as Ktzia Alon and Dalya Markovich have argued, Mizrahi literature engages in a dialogue with Israel's territorial borders, and with spaces that are both geographic and cultural. The Mizrahi space – the *ma'abara*, the development town,⁶⁵ and, in Matalon's works, the immigrant neighborhood – is a space outside "the place." Authors describe life in these peripheral neighborhoods as experiences that are engraved into the immigrants' identities as well as those of their children. As Batya Shimoni comments, these spaces are "depicted in literature as choking,"⁶⁶ and undesirable but which are nevertheless inescapable.

Lucette's family's prefab was forlorn, poorly insulated, and constructed directly on the sand without a foundation. This house is a haven for the family, a place where "the law of the ways and habits of life known only to members of the household, the unspoken rules of how things were done and how they should be done, with the right rhyme, rhythm, and meter" (275). However, it is not called "home" in the novel but, instead, it is referred to as "the shack," or the "not-home," or the missing home (2–3). The disparity between "home" and "shack" makes it clear that this enclosure fails to serve as an intimate and safe space. The shack repulses protective significance.

The shack is a silent witness to all the events in the novel, and also changes with time, thus mirroring the condition of those inhabiting it. In Oz, the dark and silent room is linked to his mother's mental state. Matalon's mother is not a character in the shack; she is analogous to it: "She [the mother] herself wasn't another person, she was the shack" (27). Lucette struggles to confirm her ownership, destroying and rebuilding its interior in a desperate attempt to make it a home. Na'ama Tsal, in her study of the idea of home in Matalon's novel, maintains that "this agitation and ongoing mobility are inseparable [...] from the deep desire for stable domestic boundaries."⁶⁷ For instance, Lucette puts up wallpaper, then covers it with wooden beams, replaces carpets, turning the structure into a dynamic entity and a source of limitless possibilities. She constantly attempts to redesign the walls to feel that she belongs and that this is her home (312). As Matalon writes: "That was it – the process: she tore down and moved the walls of the shack as renewed confirmation of belonging, of home" (225).

This non-home is constantly contrasted with the mother's previous home and sense of belonging in Egypt. What remains of these experiences are the objects from her former

space that she throws out and then rescues in a toxic combination of nostalgia and anger (114). Instead of stability, the house trembles from the inside, as well as from the outside, since the shack “gets lost” in wind and rain (189).

Like Oz’s house, the Matalon’s living quarters do not provide safety or belonging. In Oz’s home, the walls are thick, like a bunker or a jail, as though the only way to survive this Land was by closing the doors and blocking out the light. In Matalon’s prefab, the walls are thin and unstable, and the shack is open to the winds, as though there was no protection at all. In both novels, the mother is analogous to the home either through her remoteness in Oz or her physicality in Matalon.

Appended to the home is the garden or a dream of a garden. As in Oz’s novel, the inability to grow trees and flowers takes on symbolic meaning. Matalon describes a similar defeat: the narrator illustrates at length the “non-garden” that is concurrently a source of hope and testimony to failure. In the mother’s constant attempts to invent a sense of home, she tries to grow flowers by following the guidelines for an ideal garden in a horticulture book (which parallels Oz’s father and the books he borrows from the library). This is her dream:

Elgnena in place of suspended desire, her suspended desires. Elgnena as an invitation to climb a slippery mountain slope, to reach the peak, the rose garden. Elgnena as a penal colony, a forced labor camp – for her, for her fellows. Elganana as a Sanatorium. Elganena as a natural extension of the interior (52).

As in Oz, Lucette believes that the land pleads for the Palestinians, as though only they knew the secret of the promised land. She dreams of a garden in Arabic, constantly uses the Arabic word “elgnena” to describe it, and hires a Palestinian gardener, Mustafa, to whom she can express her hopes in her first language. However, despite their joint efforts at producing a garden, the flowers die and she draws flowers instead, rather than growing them and paints roses, cyclamens, and poppies. Thus, parallel to their efforts to make the land bloom, Lucette and Mustafa drink coffee together, while Mustafa examines her painting (336).

The novel ends when Lucette decides to visit Mustafa, to see how he is doing during a curfew imposed by the Israeli military on the Occupied Territories, and persuades her son to take her to the West Bank, an unusual step by an Israeli. There she discovers the extent of his hardship and his poverty and when she looks around she sees that “the entire wall of the room was covered with the mother’s flower painting,” (367) on which his daughters stuck real soil and leaves and flowers, most of them already dried.

Matalon’s decision to end her novel with this picture of the glued soil on the picture on the wall of Mustafa’s apartment suggests a new assessment of the question of the promised land. Mustafa and Lucette shared their longing for the land they lost. They are both uprooted, and thus are not on opposite sides as in Oz’s equation. Matalon does not suggest a resolution or political scheme in her novel but points to the intimate suffering of the two people. However, while Matalon creates an analogy between Mizrahi women and the Arab gardener she bluntly articulates that while the novel illustrates the marginal place of Mizrahi women and the trauma of immigration, the reader must not forget the Palestinians, the victims of the national project. In describing the Palestinian in his territory, with his wretched house (unlike the orientalist flourishing garden of the El-Silwany family before 1948 in Oz’s work), Matalon inserts visible cracks in her main story

of the Mizrahim by showing that behind the exclusion of the Mizrahim lies the worse fate of the Palestinians.⁶⁸

These differences between the two novels again highlight the disparity between Oz's empathy and paternalism in his version of the conflict and Matalon's "empathic unsettlement." In Emmy Koopman's analysis of the concept of "empathic unsettlement" in the works of J.M. Coetzee, she suggested that it can provide a "fruitful 'middle ground' between a 'conventional' engaging narrative which allows readers to understand the represented Other, and disrupting techniques which make it clear that understanding the Other can never be complete."⁶⁹ This creates a "balance between disruption and engagement."⁷⁰ While Oz's authoritative version assumes it understands the Palestinians and encourages empathy for Jewish survivors, Matalon's "empathic unsettlement" breaks down any delusive empathy. By bringing the real victims of this disputed land to the fore, she eliminates any possibility for self-pity and refuses to prolong the national denial.

The photo – A portrait of the artist as a young person

A photo is assumed to be objective evidence of an experience in that its caption can confirm a story. It is an authoritative representation of the factual. To document his family's story, Oz goes through an album that survived, "studying," as Nancy Miller suggested, "the portraits of family and friends captured in these snapshots of Eastern European life before the disaster."⁷¹

A battered photo album survives from Vilna days. Here is Father, with his brother David, both still at school [...] here is Grandpa Alexander [...] and here are some group photographs, perhaps a graduation class (98).

Oz looks at the pictures, wondering about the fate of each face. As the reader cannot see the pictures, they operate as a point of departure to the narrative. However, one real picture is reproduced in the book. In Chapter 59, one week before the death of Fania, she suddenly feels better and decides to take her "two men" to a restaurant. "She looked so beautiful and elegant in her navy jersey and light skirt, in her nylon stockings with a seam at the back and her high-heeled shoes" (484). Mother and son go to the Terra Sancta Building, where the Hebrew University was located at that time, to surprise Oz's father who "suddenly cheered up, and fired with enthusiasm" and "put his arms round both our shoulders" (489), feeling that "heaven is smiling on us today" (490). The idealistic picture of the loving family is destroyed a few minutes later, possibly because they overhear a tense conversation in German between two elderly women sitting at the next table. Mother turns pale and says she wants to go home, a cab is ordered, a doctor is called, and new pills are prescribed. A few days later she goes to her sister's home in Tel-Aviv, to the apartment where she commits suicide. An actual photo of Oz with his parents is however included in both the Hebrew and English editions of the novel. This is the only photo in the text. Fania is in the middle, with a smiling face, Oz's father tilts his head gently toward her shoulder and Oz the child looks straight at the camera (Figure 1).

What can we learn from this photo? In this picture, Oz is a small child, younger than he was during the scene at the restaurant, yet the insertion of the picture in this story encapsulates the story of love and darkness and his poetics.



Figure 1. Amos Oz with his father, Yehuda Arie, and his mother, Fania. Courtesy of the Oz family.

Oz's novel presents his personal struggle for identity. Oz the child is described in the book as lonely,⁷² and feels that the entire burden of his parents' aspirations is upon him: "everything they did not achieve in life, everything which was not given to them was loaded onto my shoulders by my parents" (307). This is evidenced in the photo where he stands beneath his parents in his good clothes representing the promise of the future.

After his mother's death he is "too hurt and angry" (203) to mourn her, and decides to separate himself from his parents and change his name, in an attempt to adopt the native Israeli Sabra identity. He takes on the change of identity demanded by the national ideology – an act his parents could not perform – but nevertheless describes this decision in terms of violence directed against the self. However, the text itself, with its dual gaze that authorizes both irony and criticism, is proof that the aspirations of the young Amos were impossible to achieve. "Oz had come a long way from the day he turned 14-and-a-half, the day he decided to erase his family name, to abandon his father's house, to leave Jerusalem and uproot himself to Hulda," writes Dan Laor, suggesting that Oz could only fully accept his origins, Jerusalem and his immigrant parents in this later book, many years after he "killed" his father.⁷³ Oz could only reveal his childhood trauma once his position and status were established.

The choice to include this picture exemplifies this idea. It shows the true story beneath Oz's Sabra image (familiar from the many photos of Oz himself) and is part of the book's cultural importance. This is especially true for the nature of the photo which is typical of people who go to a photographer's studio to have a family picture taken. It does not reveal the pain and suffering experienced by Oz's mother and family, but rather captures an instant of normativity that does not exist in the hundreds of pages of Oz's autobiography. It immortalizes a minute, a dream of love, an optimistic gaze, while emphasizing

the loss. The photo was taken in the 1940s and does not show Israeli spaces. It is a diasporic photo, where the heavy clothes and the photographer's backdrop resembles many other family pictures of the 1930s and the 1940s, including pictures that were taken before the Holocaust and are a testament to family members who were murdered later. Through this image of "the lost family" that many readers are familiar with from their own photos of family members, Oz, the well-known Sabra, reveals the child he once was. This was a brave and inspiring action and accounts for the enormous attention and the emotional and empathetic reactions it received, but it cannot be separated from Oz's voice and his senior status as one of the canonical authors of Israeli literature.⁷⁴

Unlike Oz, who came from a hegemonic-intellectual family where writing was almost a vocation and wrote this novel at the peak of his career, Matalon had to struggle to find her voice. In "Mihutz la-makom, be-tokh ha-zman" (Out of Place, Inside Time), she discusses this challenge and inquires "how does the minority, the immigrant, identify itself from within itself, in its own voice?"⁷⁵

In contrast to Oz, whose family's aspirations were concentrated on him, a son who would fulfill the national aspirations, "the girl" in Matalon's novel is always perceived as an interruption, and she internalizes that it is better for her to disappear or be mute. She is an addition to the family, she clings to her mother and her brother and sister, she is passive, tries not to make a lot of noise, and does not express any demands, complaints, or thoughts. Her choice to write follows what bell hooks, an African-American author, feminist, and social activist describes as "talking back."⁷⁶ This constitutes the point of departure for the process of "coming to voice" as a woman who expresses "our movement from object to subject."⁷⁷ This is typical of women's autobiographies in general and the autobiographical writings of marginal women authors in particular.⁷⁸ The act of writing and the position of the writer, both of which are part of Matalon's novel, lead to a process of gazing and phrasing:

The yearning heart, which was born with the first gaze at the first object: the pathos of the reservoir. The future, in the guise of the yearning backward gaze, was also the past and the present, a memory that I must discard if I am to preserve it (81).

Writing and gazing allow the protagonist to look at her past from a different perspective and use that knowledge to bolster her coming of age as an intellectual. This process is full of contradictions and incompleteness and thus demands a different structure. Although Matalon stated that "I tried to be a very faithful listener to my memories. That is why the novel is so fragmented,"⁷⁹ the structure of the text is much more than an authentic recollection of the past. The free flow of the text and the vagueness of memory signal the artificiality of a linear life story and its teleological unfolding; however, a deliberate rationale guides its design.

The text is composed of fragmented sections of short chapters linking experiences, attitudes, and memories. The sequences of memories, along with letters, political manifestos, quotations from novels and gardening books, all organized non-chronologically, create different perspectives but remain linked syntactically since the word that ends one chapter is the same word that starts the next chapter. Balaban called the novel an arabesque, a structure that preserves a central facet of the mother's roots in Egypt, whereas Nitza Keren suggested "quilt writing" as a way to describe the patchwork of interlocking materials. However, above all this is a portrait that demands a different approach, as shown through the only photo referred to in the text.

Photography plays a role in Matalon's novel. Her engagement with photography started with her first novel, *The One Facing Us*, where her dominant esthetic strategy was to refer to photos but to deliberately undermine their validity. The chapters begin with reproductions of pictures (or pictures that are only described), which launch the narrative. These pictures are fictional and they express the slippery dichotomy between facts and imagination. In fact, as noted by Omri Ben Yehuda, Matalon uses photography to instill doubt in regards to identification and to blur categories of identity.⁸⁰ In *Bliss*, she also describes Sara as being a photographer and her informal activity of taking photos of sleeping people, also with no reference to their identities.⁸¹

In *The Sound of our Steps*, only one photograph is described, but according to Nancy Berg the entire novel is in fact a portrait in which the artist generates a gaze from the outside and a dialogue with its observer/reader.⁸² Whereas Oz's photo is a formal one in terms of its setting and also in its clarity as concrete evidence that appears in the text, Matalon writes about a picture of herself and her parents taken in Italy when she and her mother visited her father (23). The chapter "Piazza San Marco: First visit" (25) describes the photograph: "There were three of us in the photograph: him, the mother, and me at the age of a year and ten months" (25). The photo shows the relationship between the parents and the girl as a beloved infant (as opposed to many other incidents in the text).

The photograph is split: three deep creases run down its right side, passing through Maurice, the square, the group of pigeons on the right. It looks as if it has been glued together, or as if it has been fished out of something, rescued despite itself, as if it has become fiction or was always fiction. A fictitious photograph. She says: "It was when I took you to Italy, for him to see you when you were about two years old." It never happened. (26-7).

Matalon goes back and forth from photo to text. The photo is only described in the text so the reader cannot see it or be sure it exists. In an interview with Dalia Ben-Ari, Matalon showed this specific picture and stated that "this is the only family photo in which I have a mother and a father together, and the photo seems delusional and fictitious to me, on the borderline between 'was' and 'wasn't' [Figure 2](#)."⁸³

In the novel, the photo becomes a literary figure preserving the tension between its existence and its fictitious quality. It also correlates with other figures and portraits,



Figure 2. Ronit Matalon with her mother, Emma, and her father, Felix. Courtesy of the Matalon family.

such as Monet's picture that is hanging on the walls of the shack.⁸⁴ The constant reexamination of the photo portraying a normative family underscores how unrepresentative and fantastic this event was since its intimate and optimistic content refutes the "the history of the *familia* and her place in it tiptoed around holes, pits of heavy, ambivalent silence: the eyes troubles were there in the silence, the partial blindness, the flaws"(12).

These two family photographs can serve as a metonym for the nature of Oz's and Matalon's autobiographical writings. They reveal an instant of joy and a wish for normativity, but they clash with the misery of the families. Neither of them articulates the specific Israeli space, and thus negates the ideological demand for national rooting. They both reveal that facts, photos, and documents cannot tell the whole story and that grasping the autobiographical narrative is a constant dialectical movement between pedagogical narrative and the performativity of the intimate and the personal, between a photo and what is hiding behind it.

However, the Oz family photo, which is real and evidence, enables him, for the first time, to remove his cover story and reveal his childhood and his uprooted parents. This diasporic picture, with its typical setting, represents a historical moment, makes the tragedy vivid, and corresponds to the lives of many readers who can identify with his story. Thus it brings together the authoritative voice (Oz the persona who shows his childhood photo) and an emotional and empathetic reaction.

Matalon's photo tells a different story. It does not exist in the text, and thus cannot immediately draw the attention or elicit the emotions of the reader. Its validity is undermined all the time since, above all, it does not represent any historical moment. This photo expresses a much more modest position of the author/narrator that counters and subverts any authoritative voice: when times and places, memory, and speculations, truth and fiction are merged, and the hierarchies are broken, the suffering is real but empathy is always evasive. This creates a feeling of unease and demonstrates the power of "empathetic unsettlement" in any collective narrative or ideology.

A Tale of Love and Darkness and *The Sound of Our Steps* are clearly two monuments of contemporary Israeli literature. They both relate to the trauma of immigration and cast doubt on Israeli meta-narratives by revealing the tension between the personal and the national and between formal autobiographical writing and the narration of fragmented memory and recollection. Their mutual focus on the relationship between mother and child and their representation of home, garden, and the question of the land reveal the disparity between them. Oz's combination of an authoritative voice, the acknowledgment that it is Oz, the ultimate sabra and the renowned author who reveals his secret, and the poetics of empathy that conveyed this strong feeling, gave him the power to openly discuss and criticize the cost of Zionism. Matalon, on the other hand, adopted poetics that rupture emotional identification and create "empathic unsettlement," as a means to subvert the national endeavor. With her unauthoritative voice that undermines its own realization, her story shows that it is possible to tell an Israeli story with no harmony or happy end.

Notes

1. Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 11.
2. Hess, *Self as Nation*, 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 2.
4. Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 5.
5. See: Gilmore, *The Limit of Autobiography*, 2; and Miller, "Representing others."
6. Smith and Watson, "Introduction," 20.
7. Olney, *Metaphors of Self*, 38; and *Memory and Narrative*.
8. Kaplan, "Amos Oz's A Tale of Love and Darkness," 122.
9. See for instance: Ashkenazi, "Ha-hakhi yafa," 170.
10. *Ibid.*, 11.
11. Gili Izikovitz, "Ha'im janer ha-auto-fiction hoo be-sakh ha-kol sifrut shel narkisistim [Is the Auto-fiction Genre Merely the Literature of Narcissists?]," *Haaretz*, February 1, 2019. https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/literature/.premium-MAGAZINE-1.6803878#hero__bot tom. Accessed November 8, 2020.
12. Hess, *Self as Nation*, 2.
13. Ben-Dov, *Haim ktuvim*, 15.
14. Oz, *Sippur*, 36 (in Hebrew). see also Ben-Dov, *Haim ktuvim*, 14–15; and Hess, *Self as Nation*, 9.
15. See: Schwartz, *Pulhan ha-sofer ve-dat ha-medina*, 30.
16. Ari Shavit, "Ha-yehudi ha-sored – re'ayon im Amos Oz [The Surviving Jew – Interview with Amos Oz]," *Haaretz*, March 1, 2002. <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.775818>. Accessed November 13, 2020.
17. Elkad-Lehman, "Ha-bait hu ha-makom"; Balaban, *Teysha imahot ve-ima*, 82–99; Keren, "Hed psi'otenu."
18. Matalon, *Kro u'khtov*, 13–4.
19. Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps*, 133. All quotations from the novel are from the translation by Dalya Bilu, and are marked by page numbers only.
20. Although the father in the novel has many traits in common with the author's biological father, his name in the story is Maurice, not Felix. The real name of Matalon's mother is Emma, but she is called Lucette or Levana in the novel (11). The girl is described throughout the novel in the third person, although it is clear that the character is identified with the narrator. Her name is not identical to the author's name either.
21. Dinah Assouline Stillman, "The Sounds of Memory in Writing: A Conversation with Ronit Matalon," *World Literature Today*, May 2015, <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2015/may/sounds-memory-writing-conversation-ronit-matalon-dinah-assouline-stillman>. Accessed November 8, 2020.
22. Matalon, *Ad argi'ah*, 156.
23. Tsal, "haster astir panay," 73. Tsal sees this novel as the "third try to tell the story of the family."
24. Smith and Watson. "Introduction," 27. See also: Huddart, *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography*.
25. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Spivak, "Three Women's Texts."
26. Matalon, *Kro u-khtov*, 45–6.
27. See for example: Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
28. Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 299.
29. On the dialectic between the narrative of *aliyah* and the narrative of *immigration* and their manifestations in Hebrew literature, see Mendelson-Maoz, "Amos Oz," 70–76.
30. See also Porat, "Hayah be-yerushalayim pahad," 143–154.
31. Feige, "Introduction: Rethinking Israel Memory and Identity," vi.
32. Schwartz, *Pulhan ha-sofer ve-dat ha-medina*, 151.
33. Zerubavel, "The 'Mythological Sabra,'" 18.

34. All quotations from the novel are from the translation by Nicholas de Lange, and marked by page numbers only.
35. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 394.
36. Shapira, "Ha-sippur ha-tziyoni," 164.
37. Jaffee, "The Victim Community."
38. Schwartz, *Pulhan ha-sofer ve-dat ha-medina*, 145.
39. Schwartz, "Sus troyani," 90–91.
40. Matalon, *Kro u-khtov*, 48.
41. Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel*, 120–122.
42. Deborah Starr discusses the role of this novel in Matalon's writing. See: Starr, "Kriah, ktiva, ve-hizakhrut."
43. See for example the grotesque descriptions by Dan Benaya-Seri in which the characters' sexuality changes and bodily organs become autonomous, as well as detailed physical descriptions of characters who fail to comply with the Sabra bodily ideal which enable literature to deviate from the ideological concept of the Zionist body.
44. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 8.
45. The literature on empathy is intensive. See Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy – Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*; Hoffman's *Empathy and Moral Development*. For more on empathy in literature, see Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*.
46. On the criticism of empathy see Amiel Hauser's and Mendelson Maoz' reading of Levinas in "Against Empathy" and Mendelson-Maoz on the risk of imperialism, in "The Fallacy of Analogy."
47. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 78.
48. LaCapra argues that the film *Schindler's List* works in this direction.
49. *Ibid.*, 41.
50. *Ibid.*, 78.
51. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition*, 63.
52. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 4–6.
53. Gurevitz and Aran, "Al ha-makom," 11.
54. See: Robinson, "Exiled in the Homeland," 66.
55. Almog, *The Sabra*, 164–171.
56. Gluzman, *ha-guf ha-tziony*.
57. Schwartz, *ha-yadata et ha-arets*, 13.
58. *Ibid.*, 32.
59. *Ibid.*, 448.
60. Milner, "Sippur mishpahti," 74.
61. See also: Ben-Dov, "Ne'ilah she-hi be'ila," 117–129.
62. Gertz, "ha-nofim shelo," 216.
63. Yosef, *The Politics of Loss*, 143.
64. See: Mendelson-Maoz, "The Fallacy of Analogy."
65. Alon and Markovich, "Yalda shehora," 10–12.
66. Shimoni, *Al saf ha-geula*, 256.
67. Tsal, "He is missing," 310.
68. This strategy also appears in the last line of her novel *Sara Sara* (Bliss): "They've murdered your Rabin," which does not give the reader any relief from the political context. Matalon, *Sara Sara*, 262.
69. Koopman, *Reading the Suffering of Others*, 237.
70. *Ibid.*, 240.
71. Miller, "I Killed My Grandmother," 323.
72. Shaked, "Matzeva le-avot ve-siman le-banim," 17.
73. Laor, "Be-mehozot ha-zikaron," 39–40.
74. Avirama Golan considers the success of this novel to be a literary trick in which those at the margins are set within the consensus as a device for the return of the Zionist narrative. Golan's claim that "the power of *Love and Darkness* resides in the use it

makes of the legitimacy conferred by the multicultural concept to the marginal narrative simply in order to strengthen the central (or previously central) narrative” and presents the idea that by transforming the trauma of immigration from a private event into a collective trauma, he creates a counterfeit homogeneous text. See: Avirama Golan, “Ha'im ha-sippur shelo hu ha-sippur shelanu? [Is his story our story?],” *Haaretz sfarim*, August 31, 2005. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1040323>. Accessed November 8, 2020.

75. Matalon, *Kero u-khetov*, 47.
76. On Matalon, bell hooks and the black female autobiography, see Galon and Mendelson Maoz, “An Autobiography of Her Own.”
77. hooks, “Taking Back,” 6, 9.
78. Smith and Watson, “Introduction”; and Galon and Mendelson Maoz, “An Autobiography of Her Own.”
79. Assouline Stillman, “The Sounds of Memory.”
80. Ben Yehuda, “Le-lo panim,” 86.
81. See note above 64.
82. Berg, “Mabat sheni.”
83. Dalia Ben-Ari, “Tmunot me-ha-haim: Re'ayon im Ronit Matalon [Pictures from life: An Interview with Ronit Matatlon],” *La-isha*, 2008. Re-published in “Ha-biographia ha-metzulemet shel Ronit Matalon” [The Pictured Biography of Ronit Matalon], *La-isha*, December 12, 2017. <https://xnet.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5063182,00.html>. Accessed November 6, 2020.
84. Berg, “Mabat sheni,” 134.

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