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Arab-Israeli tensions and Kibbutz life in an early story by Amos Oz

This essay examines the multivalent themes in the allegorical tale “Navadim Vatzefa”/“Nomad and Viper” (1965) by Amos Oz. Penned just prior to the outbreak of the 1967 Six Day War, a time when Israel was consumed by a mood of siege and in imminent danger from its hostile Arab neighbours, this existential angst is acutely echoed and reverberates throughout the story. This paper will argue that while “Navadim Vatzefa”, which is set in an unnamed Kibbutz, revolves around the violent nature of Arab-Jewish relations, Oz has a tendency to generate a landscape in which there is perplexity and ambivalence towards the other; in this case, the Arabs.

Der Beitrag befasst sich mit Amos Oz‘ allegorischer Erzählung “Navadim Vatzefa”/“Nomad and Viper” (1965): Nur zwei Jahre vor Ausbruch des Sechstagekrieges verfasst, lässt sich eine subtile bedrohliche Stimmung erahnen, die von den feindlich gesinnten arabischen Nachbarn auszugehen scheint. Eine existenzielle Angst erfasst den Handlungsort, ein anonymer Kibbutz, und seine Bewohner; Ratlosigkeit und emotionale Ambivalenzen spiegeln sich in den folgenden Reaktionen auf den „Anderen“ und werden, so eine These des Autors, durch Oz‘ vieldeutige Landschaftsbilder noch verstärkt.

The story “Navadim Vatzefa”¹ published in 1965, appeared in *Artzot Hatan*², Amos Oz’s first collection of tales, which won critical acclaim and received the Israeli Holon Municipal Prize for Literature. Over the last four decades, this volume has acquired a keystone place in the annals of Hebrew literature and culture as generations of Israeli high school and university students have learned the tale and imbibed its multivalent themes³ Writing about the English edition that appeared in 1981, A. G. Mojtabi avers that “This is a book of dark shadows and glare, and through the shadows, in and around each story, glides the jackal. The most haunting issue raised is that of exclusion, dispossession.”⁴ It’s noteworthy that the story was written prior to the outbreak of the 1967 Six-Day War, a time when Israel was seized by a consuming mood of siege and a sense of imminent danger from its

¹ First published in Hebrew in 1965. Amos Oz: *Artzot Hatan*, Tel Aviv: Masada, 1965 and translated into English as “Nomad and Viper”. I am using the version that appeared in the English translation by Nicholas de Lange. Amos Oz: *Where the Jackals Howl and Other Stories*. London: Vintage, 1992.

² Translated into English as *Where the Jackals Howl and Other Stories*.

³ Schwartz, Yigal: *Hayadata et Ha’arezt Sham Halimon Poreach: Handasat Ha’adam Umachsevet Hamerchav basifrtu Ha’ivrit Ha’chadasha*. Or Yehuda: Kineter, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2007.

⁴ Mojtabi, A. G.: “Perpetual Stranger in the Promised Land.”, in: *The New York Times* (26 April 1982), p. 3.

surrounding Arab neighbours. This existential angst is intensely reflected in the cluster of stories, and in particular in “Navadim Vatzefa”.

At the same time, Oz brilliantly captures, in miniature strokes, the simmering tensions and dramas of kibbutz life, which represents, in his own words, a microcosm of Israeli society.⁵ We recall that Oz penned the stories while still a member of Kibbutz Hulda, and his portraitures, as Calev Ben David shrewdly notes, paint the kibbutzim as, “seething hothouses of frustrated emotions and tangled ideologies, far from the ideal of utopian Marxist communities they were set up to be”⁶

One of the primary themes resonating through the stories in *Artzot Hatan* is that of the hungry jackal, lurking outside the compound of the kibbutz. The jackal, embodying danger and imminent invasion, serves as the all-embracing metaphor for the threatening, foreboding and encircling Arab forces waiting to pounce. Another subject that permeates the stories is the oedipal rebellion by the sons against the aging generation of the fathers, fuelled by clashing values and temperaments. Most of the characters in *Artzot Hatan* are isolated individuals, teetering on the verge of explosion that is spawned by a sense of loneliness, ambivalence, and unfulfilled desires. There are breath-catching moments that showcase Oz’s artistic dexterity in crafting religious intonations and parabolic textural threads in the story’s fabric and timber.

On the surface, “Navadim Vatzefa’s” operating theme is the ancient and intrinsically violent nature of Arab-Jewish relations. Told through the eyes of an unnamed member of the kibbutz and an all-knowing narrator, the tale begins with the description of the Bedouins fleeing the famine in the south of Israel, brought about by a savage drought: “The loess was pounded to dust. Famine had spread through the nomads’ encampment and wrought havoc among their flocks.”⁷ The military authorities, at first reluctant, open the roads and allow the Bedouin tribes, with their flocks of sheep and camels, to camp in the vicinity of a kibbutz and to search for grazing land.

From the beginning, Oz calls attention to the nomads’ perceived secretive and mysterious purpose, though it should be remembered that their rendering is transmitted through the subjective stereotypical lens of the narrator, who is part of the kibbutz. With an atmosphere of specificity that reflects Oz’s poetic sense of place, they are described in creepy, sinister strokes: “dark, sinuous and wiry”⁸; “they meandered along gullies hidden from town dwellers’ eyes”⁹; “the nomads’ bearing was stealthy and subdued; they shrank from watchful eyes”¹⁰; “tried to conceal their presence...among them lies the shepherd, fast asleep, dark as a block of basalt”¹¹; “the very darkness is their accomplice. Elusive as the wind, they passed through the

⁵Chertok, Chaim: *We are Close*, New York, 1989, p. 155.

⁶David, Ben: “Review of *Where the Jackals Howl*.”, in: *Midstream*, 1998, p. 4.

⁷Oz, 1992, p. 21.

⁸Oz, 1992, p. 21.

⁹Oz, 1992, p. 21.

¹⁰Oz, 1992, p. 21.

¹¹Oz, 1992, p. 22.

settlement...”¹² Oz immediately creates an obtrusive binary opposition and juxtaposition the between Jewish Kibbutz members and the nomads, situating the Arabs them as the stereotypical, determinable other. To wit, the narrator depicts the nomads in monochromatic hues, not as individuals, but rather as collective entity, denuded of individual features, “They stared at you from a distance, frozen like statues. The scorching atmosphere blurred their appearance and gave a uniform look to their features.”¹³

Before long, the simmering tensions between the kibbutzniks and the Bedouins boil over. Oz has a tendency, generally in *Artzot Hatan* and specifically in “Navadim Vatzefa” of generating a landscape in which there is perplexity and ambivalence toward the other—in this case, the Arab nomads. Though the Bedouins are their polar opposites and, by overrunning the kibbutz, have threatened their ‘serene’ existence, the kibbutzniks are nevertheless fascinated by the mystery and primal ferociousness these ‘savages’ encompass.

Oz deftly adumbrates the unsettling and disorienting effect the nocturnal alien presence has on the Jewish residents. Their unintelligible mutterings, typified by singing, yield constant and unnerving flashes of portentous threat: “And then, their singing at night. A long-drawn out, dolorous wail drifts on the night air from sunset until the early hours. The voices penetrate to the gardens and pathways of the kibbutz and charge our nights with an uneasy heaviness”.¹⁴ The Bedouins’ hounds, described as vicious (in the Hebrew version they are referred to as “evil”), drive the kibbutz’s finest dog mad with their barking, so much so that he breaks into the chicken coop and kills the young chicks, forcing the watchman to shoot him. The Arabs’ perceived abnormality is emblemized in the following description: “Some were half-blind, or perhaps feigned half-blindness from some vague alms-gathering motive. Inscrutable to the likes of you”.¹⁵

Yochai Oppenheimer argues that Oz’s description of the Arab protagonist is consonant with other Israeli writers of the 1960s in that the Arab is “identifiable only by external features, the result of a projection of Israeli fears and desires”.¹⁶ Oppenheimer goes on to say that Oz:

“...radicalized the list of features while producing a latent parodization of the gaze upon the Arab. Parody also concretizes the quasi-automatic association between external appearance and the operative conclusions it is supposed to serve...the Arab’s appearance, expected to reinforce the recognition of a distinction between ethnic groups, functions as justification for an act of revenge against one suspected (because of his appearance) of being a threatening figure, deserving of punishment.”¹⁷

¹²Oz, 1992, p. 21.

¹³Oz, 1992, p. 22.

¹⁴Oz, 1992, p. 23.

¹⁵Oz, 1992, p. 22.

¹⁶Oppenheimer, Yochai/Janko, Dorina: “The Arab in the Mirror: The Image of the Arab in Israeli Fiction.”, in: *Prooftexts* 19 (1999), pp. 205–234, here p. 229.

¹⁷Oppenheimer/Janko, Arab in the Mirror, 1999, p. 233.

One passage from the story, in which the narrator justifies the bashing of an Arab shepherd, nicely bears Oppenheimer's analysis: "He was blind in one eye, broken nosed, drooling; and his mouth—on this the men responsible were unanimous—was set with long, curved fangs like a fox's. A man with such appearance was capable of anything."¹⁸

Gilead Morahg levels similar criticism to Oppenheimer. Although Israeli literature of the period betrays a stronger acknowledgment of the Arab presence and their hostility toward the Jewish settlement on the land, Morahg contends that "As awareness increases, however, the scope of Arab representations in the literature decreases. Although the concern with the consequences of the Arab-Israeli conflict moves to the thematic foreground of the later fiction, the use of Arab characters as a means of engaging this concern is greatly diminished".¹⁹ Morahg then refers specifically to "Navadim Vatzefa" as a quintessential example of works that contain marginal Arab characters.

Like other Oz's stories in *Artzot Hatan*, "Navadim Vatzefa" is constructed around dialectical, concentric rings, focusing on the characters' psychological dramas and the inevitable conflict between the ego and its shadow, "Tensions between the different psychic forces are reflected in the struggle between the dull, humdrum, secure existence within society's borders and the vibrant, alluring, and destructive experiences that lie beyond those borders...the major processes portrayed in Oz's fiction are typically Jungian: the "self" is attained only when the protagonist is reconciled with the dark aspects of his personality..."²⁰ Paradoxically, the central female protagonist of "Navadim Vatzefa" who rejected the narrator's stories because of their "extreme polarity of situations, scenery, and characters, with no intermediate shades between black and white,"²¹ abandons herself to the same state of extreme polarity in her risky flirtation with the Bedouin. For Saul Kirschbaum, the encounter exemplifies a larger motif in the Oz canon: "We observe that a feeling of perplexity towards the other pervades his work; the other whom we know little or nothing, which is perceived as a potential threat and, at the same time, as the holder of a mystery that fascinates us, that gives rise to a mix of attraction-repulsion".²² Furthermore, on a larger scale, the peripatetic, helpless Bedouins, roaming northward in search of water and fertile ground, have switched places with the "wandering Jews" who have now become the permanent residents of the land, ensconced and protected by fences. Schwartz argues that through a series of contrasting analogies, Oz creates semiotic, topographical and physical differences between the Arab characters and the Israeli-Jewish protagonists.²³

¹⁸Oz, 1992, p. 24.

¹⁹Gilead, Morahg: "Images of Arabs in Israeli Fiction.", in: *Prooftexts* 6:2 (1986), pp. 147–162, here p. 148.

²⁰Balaban, Avraham: "Amos Oz" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2nd edition) Volume 15, New York 2007, pp. 554–556.

²¹Oz, 1992, p. 28.

²²Kirschbaum, Saul: "Amos Oz: The Perplexity of Inversion of Positions." Paper delivered at the Association for Israel Studies (2008), p. 3.

²³Schwartz, Hayadata, 2007, pp. 378–379.

The nomads are blamed for the crop damage, for the foot-and-mouth diseases that have infected the kibbutz cattle and that have impacted on milk production, as well as for petty thefts. A generational conflict erupts inside the kibbutz concerning the appropriate response. Though the nomads are accused of pilfering and thievery, police raids turn up no evidence of their crimes and the accused deny any wrongdoing. Indeed, the narrator admits that not one Bedouin was caught in the act of damaging the crops. Still, the younger men retaliate by beating a shepherd and, in another act of reprisal, stone a nomad boy.

A meeting between Etkin, the kibbutz secretary, and the elderly leader of the Bedouins is convened, in part to placate the younger kibbutz members, and in part to try to resolve the escalating crisis between the two groups. The old Arab admits that some of the youngsters have stolen property and offers to return some screws, pruning hooks, a knife blade, a pocket flashlight, and some banknotes. But he denies responsibility for the acts of sabotage and vandalism Etkin has detailed. In light of the unsatisfactory outcome of the meeting and the decision by the police to terminate any investigation, the younger generation of kibbutzniks (led by Rami) propose, “making an excursion one night to teach the savages a lesson in a language they would really understand”²⁴

Etkin, calmly and coolly, rejects the calls for revenge, but agrees to take the matter to a vote of the kibbutz secretariat. At the assembly, a dispute erupts between the old administrator and the younger men of the kibbutz. The moderate Etkin, who countenances restraint and vehemently opposes resorting to violence, is offended by the attitude of the group advocating retaliation. Rami and the other youngsters storm out of the meeting when Etkin prevents them from expressing their views. In the end, the unnamed narrator, who vacillated between the two contradictory positions of restraint and aggression, joins the belligerent younger kibbutz members on their way to a retaliatory expedition against the nomads. Notice that the narrator, who throughout disagreed with the use of violence, switches the point of view, in the narrative’s concluding scene, from “I” to “we” as he joins the gang of attackers. In the wake of the other members’ complete radicalization, he forsakes his sympathetic and propitiating stand toward the Bedouins and enlists in the revengeful raid.

A parallel plotline involves the main protagonist of “Navadim Vatzefa”, Geula Sirkin (Geula means “redemption” in Hebrew). Geula is a 29 year-old single woman, frustrated at the kibbutz men who have rejected her sexually and socially. On a hot summer evening, she undertakes one of her nightly walks. Geula’s stroll is redolent with sexual desperation and stifled eroticism. Her sensuous actions disclose her attempt to reach sexual fulfilment:

“By the irrigation pipe she paused, bent down and drank, as though kissing the faucet . . . she bent her head and let the water pour over her face and into her shirt . . . Geula picked a plum, sniffed and crushed it. Sticky juice dripped from it. The sight made her feel dizzy. And the smell. She crushed a second plum. She picked another and rubbed it on her cheek till she was spattered with juice”.²⁵

²⁴Oz, 1992, p. 24.

²⁵Oz, 1992, pp. 30–31.

Earlier, Geula's dizzying yearning for release of the erotic being throbbing fiercely inside her is evinced by her attempts to smash a dirty bottle, first by kicking it and then twice by hitting it with a stone. At her fourth attempt she succeeds, but even though there was a "harsh, dry explosion" it brought "no relief. Must get out".²⁶ Ablaze with a reservoir of raw, carnal urges, Geula then enlarges a hole in the fence and slips into the adjoining orchard, crossing into another realm, literally and figuratively.

Consequently, she discovers a Bedouin nomad who has infiltrated the kibbutz orchard. Finding the Bedouin shepherd repulsively attractive (despite him being blind in one eye), she sets out to seduce and ensnare him. The linguistic, ideological and cultural barriers separating this Jewish woman from this antinomian 'savage' quickly collapse. Indeed, he is, "...unlike any man Geula had ever known..."²⁷ Accepting his offer of a cigarette, she asks him for another, hoping to prolong the encounter, and wants him to disrobe, excited by the prospect of physical contact, "The girl eyed his desert robe. Aren't you hot in that thing? The man gave an embarrassed, guilty smile".²⁸ She twice repeats his earlier claim that he is still young and therefore has no girlfriend (intimating that she is available) and persists in asking him personal questions. Emboldened by the Arab's compliment that she is beautiful—a compliment, which, Avinor argues is a figment of her imagination—she touches his arms, hoping for a commensurate reaction.²⁹

Throughout this transgressive and forbidden encounter, Geula is nervous and thrilled by the potential for a sexual liaison, though she is aware that this is a man whom the Kibbutz regards as the enemy, and who more broadly belongs to the Arab nation that killed her soldier brother. Yet, she betrays no guilt. She smiles at the nomad and mistakes a narrowing of the eye for a flirtatious wink. "His blind eye narrowed. Geula was momentarily alarmed: surely it was a wink".³⁰ The young man, however, is not interested in her advances, sustaining the conversation only in an attempt to ingratiate himself to Geula and avoid being reported for trespassing to the kibbutz authority. As the encounter draws to a close, it is clear that the young nomad is uninterested; he does not reciprocate her advances. Finally, he retreats with his herd back to the nomad camp "as though from a dying creature".³¹ (foreshadowing the fate that awaits Geula). Disappointed and humiliated by her failure to lure the young, virginal pilferer, Geula is enraged and is about to scream, though no sound comes out. Geula is left disappointed and humiliated.

Oz employs the device of "mirror inversing" to impress upon the reader that the young goatherd, who is a national and cultural outsider, is Geula's doppelgänger. Indeed, Geula's affinity to the itinerant nomads and the one-eyed goatherd is heightened through an array of suggestive and correlative details. For example, she

²⁶Oz, 1992, p. 29.

²⁷Oz, 1992, p. 31.

²⁸Oz, 1992, p. 32.

²⁹Gita, Avinor: "Sipurim Acherim.", in: *Moznaim*, 3–4 (August–September 1974), p. 264.

³⁰Oz, 1992, p. 33.

³¹Oz, 1992, p. 35.

leaves her sandals in her room and walks barefoot on the dirty soil, very much like the Bedouin women who “drift around at night, barefoot and noiseless.”³² One should note that the removal of the sandals can also be read as the young woman’s discarding of her civilised, reserved, persona. Her mastery of brewing Arab coffee equates her with the Bedouins who are experts at this; her whistling an old tune corresponds to the Bedouins’ singing at night. During their interaction in the orchard, the young nomad is about to hurl a stone at the goat he flung to the ground, just as Geula earlier hurled a stone at the bottle. Nechama Aschkenasy, in an excellent article concerning the concept of the woman as the double, elaborates, “Geula comes to realise that, in a strange way, the Bedouin is her double. Both are outcasts, unattractive and unattached, and both seethe with unfulfilled erotic desires. The recognition that the physically revolting nomad, in his primitive existence, is a reflection of her own raging, uncontrollable self, fills Geula with nausea.”³³

It should be noted that Geula is filled with disgust not because the nomad touched her but because he did not. And indeed, the rejection by the nomad of Geula brings to the surface all the fallow hatred so patently fermenting inside her now. Although it is clear that no sexual or physical contact occurred (apart from Geula touching the Bedouin’s arm), the young woman slowly convinces herself that she was attacked and behaves as though she was the victim of an attempted rape. The 1965 Hebrew version of the story is explicit in affirming that no incident has taken place: “The young girl’s body is filled with disgust, although the nomad did not touch her.”³⁴ Nevertheless, she devises a more salacious dénouement that befits her expectation. At this point, her imagination takes such a strong hold of her that the supposed particulars of the attempted rape in the orchard become actual.

Fantasy intermingles with reality. Immediately after the goatherder leaves, she begins running in panic as if pursued, certain that she was attacked: “Give him a kind word, or a smile, and he pounces on you like a wild beast and tries to rape you. It was just as well I ran away from him”³⁵. She similarly imagines that she had to fight him off to escape the rape, kicking and biting the nomad as he thrust her to ground and choked her: “those black fingers, and how he went straight for my throat . . . It was only by biting and kicking that I managed to escape.”³⁶ Michael Wilfe contends that it is not only the refusal by the Bedouin to submit to Geula’s temptation that precipitates the false accusation but the shattering of the young woman’s anticipation of an actual rape: “It is clear she yearns for sexual contact with him, for an actual rape, in order to be redeemed.”³⁷

³²Oz, 1992, p. 23.

³³Aschkenasy, Nehama: “Women and the Double in Modern Hebrew Literature: Berdichewsky/Agnon/Oz/Yehoshua.”, in: *Prooftexts* 8, (1988), 125.

³⁴Oz, 1965, p. 36.

³⁵Oz, 1992, p. 35.

³⁶Oz, 1992, p. 35.

³⁷Wilfe, Michael: “Geula Ve Habedouim: Beshuley 'Navadim Vatzefa' Le Amos Oz.”, in: *Moznaim* 47:2: pp. 147–149.

Geula returns to her room to make coffee for the meeting. No longer able to contain her rage, she schemes to accuse the goatherder of a violation he did not commit as revenge for his rejection. Tellingly, at a meeting held to discuss an appropriate response to the nomads' incursion, one of the male members maliciously suggests that Geula desires to be raped by the Bedouins, symbolizing her status as a sexual pariah in the kibbutz: "Hereupon Rami broke in excitedly and asked what I was waiting for. Was I perhaps waiting for some small incident of rape that Geula could write poems about?"³⁸ Afterward, in the showers, filled with physical revulsion, anger and disgust (and perhaps self-loathing), Geula washes herself and plots to inflame and incite the already-hot-tempered young men of the kibbutz into attacking the Bedouin camp as retribution for the invented assault. Thus, Geula, who was expected to calm down the combative mood of the general meeting and discourage any violence, is now planning to instigate hostilities to assuage her wounded pride. She repudiates Etkin's humane attitude:

"I don't support violence or believe in hooliganism, but this time they have gone too far. What does Etkin think, they steal, rape and vandalise... Etkin is an intelligent man, and I do not doubt his pure intentions. If not for the thing that happened to me, I may have accepted his opinion. But he does not have a clue, he does not have an iota of insight into the psychology of the savage. The nomad smells weakness from a distance. This weakness increases their impudence and pushes them into committing real crimes. I wonder what Etkin will say, when I tell him about the goatherder that tried to rape me in the orchard."³⁹

A shift occurs. Whereas before, Geula referred to the nomad as *he*, as an individual, her rage and bitterness lead her to refer to him as *them*, echoing the Kibbutz's community hegemonic conception of the Arabs as a single, undifferentiated entity: "Yes, let the boys go right away tonight to their camp and smash *their* black bones because of what they did to me."⁴⁰ (my italics). Geula's resentment of the young Arab for rejecting her simplifies and rationalizes the violence that she is about to provoke. Unable to differentiate between fiction and reality, the circumstances of the event become so real to her that on the way back to her room, unable to forget her "ordeal," she vomits and cries in the bushes, exhausted from her "trauma"—reactions usually associated with real rape victims. On another reading, one could argue that Geula is so ashamed of the unrestrained and wild sexual drives she exposed in front of the shepherd that her only option is to invent an alternative narrative in which she displaces her raging and ungovernable longings—cravings that she could not make known within the confines of the kibbutz—onto her interlocutor. In effect, she becomes the victim. We may suspect that Oz is again hinting at the unreliability of the kibbutz members' claims and is again challenging the veracity of their accusations.

³⁸Oz, 1992, p. 37.

³⁹Oz, 1965, p. 37.

⁴⁰Oz, 1992, p. 35.

Lying in the flowering shrubs, Geula begins to whisper poems to comfort herself. She is so entranced with her daydream that she is oblivious to the fact that she has blocked a snake's hole, preventing it from returning to its lair. After being bitten, she simply removes the fangs from her skin and remains on the ground, absorbing the venom. By extension, the viper, embodying the qualities of temptation, danger, allurement, and the forbidden, is an analogue to the young nomad. Sprawled on the ground, Geula watches the young men, clubs in hands, setting out to exact their revenge. She could easily have alerted the group of youths she notices walking by of her predicament but does not. The sensations Geula experiences as the poison circulates through her veins are depicted through the aid of sexual imagery and are likened to the joy of a climax. Eros and Thanatos meld. Only in death, and only by finally merging with the primal element that was not actualized through her chance meeting with the nomad, can Geula obtain a perfect peace: "A pleasurable pain permeates through her blood and calms her body . . . the shiver of delight tatters her skin. . . . She listens to the sweet wave permeating her body and intoxicating her bloodstream. With total abandon Geula responds to the sweet wave. . . . The rapture floods the girl and endows her with a calm peace . . . soft are her fingers, soft and brimming with joy."⁴¹ Tellingly, she dies alone, as befitting her marginal status in the Kibbutz.

Esther Fuchs remarks that "with Geula dies her plot to incite the Kibbutz against the Bedouin poachers. There is thus something redeeming after all in Geula's death"⁴² I wish to suggest, contra Fuchs, that, in effect, Geula's death is senseless—we are told that as she breathes her last breath, the young men of the kibbutz, carrying sticks, make their way to the nomad camp bent on teaching the Bedouins a lesson. At another level, Geula's death can be read as the treacherous Eve's comeuppance, an image sustained by the text's suggestion that the snake's biting of Geula is not random or capricious: "Anger permeates the snake, he lifts his head and sticks out his forked tongue. The viper's rage is not arbitrary"⁴³ Similarly, if the kibbutz serves as a microcosm of Israeli society, then according to Oz any attempt to cross the unbridgeable chasm that divides the two peoples, to initiate dialogue and social interaction is doomed to fail. Indeed, Geula's death may also suggest that reconciliation is not only illusory—it is risky and fatal.

Readers will be able to trace a wide scope of unmistakable biblical allusions that underscore the plot's complexity and mythological patina. The viper that fatally wounds Geula recalls the serpent that tempts Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. The young nomad evokes Abel, the innocent shepherd from Genesis who is murdered by his brother. Significantly, and with a dose of irony, the bellicose young men of the kibbutz, tillers of the soil, could be likened to Cain, the crop farmer who felled his brother Abel. Indeed, Etkin references age-old hostility and conflict between herders and farmers when he mentions the narrative of Cain and pleads

⁴¹Oz, 1965, pp. 40–41.

⁴²Fuchs, Esther: *Israeli Mythogynies: women in contemporary Hebrew fiction*, Albany 1987, p. 64.

⁴³Oz, 1965, p. 40.

with those present to “put an end to this ancient feud, just as we had put an end to other ugly phenomena”⁴⁴

Oz’s recreation of the biblical elements inescapably recalls an Israeli version of the Garden of Eden (amplified and enhanced by the later appearance of the snake) with Geula as Eve the troublemaker.⁴⁵ The following exchange magnifies and emphasizes the scriptural connections. At one point, Geula suddenly shifts the tenor of the conversation and interrogates the shepherd about the real purpose of him being in the orchard. Her questions are interwoven with explicit allusions to the Ten Commandments: “What are you doing here, anyway? Stealing? . . . No, not stealing, heaven forbid, really not . . . Forbidden in the Bible,” Geula replied with a dry cruel smile. “Forbidden to steal, forbidden to kill, forbidden to covet, and forbidden to commit adultery”⁴⁶

The nomad functions as a trigger for Geula to shed the mask of frigidity, allowing her to embrace her own libidinal expressivity that is incompatible with her kibbutz persona. To illustrate the point, early in the story we are told that in the evenings Geula would occasionally stroll in the orchard with the narrator and engage in lengthy discussions about literature and politics. The narrator would sometimes lay a hand on her neck or Geula would lean against him, but ultimately the young woman did not allow the subtle flirtations to flower into a romantic liaison. Strictly constrained by the kibbutz, she wears the cloak of a rational, level-headed woman. Yet throbbing through her veins are ferocious, uncivilized, id-like emotions of a soul in torment craving for relief.

Aside from polemical strands, also obtrusive in the tale are themes related to the stereotype of the single woman, often found in male dominated constructs such as the Kibbutz. The prescient narrator loads his characterization of Geula with condescension and pity, depicting her as a figure of mockery in the kibbutz and repeatedly nullifying, in the guise of sympathy, any positive attributes she may possess. As Deegan found in the portrayal of the unmarried woman, “The most marked characteristic . . . is the repeated reference to unattractive physical qualities, more often than not to ugliness of face or angularity of form.”⁴⁷ And indeed, from the very outset, Geula’s unpleasant appearance is accentuated: “Her face was pale and thin... A pair of bitter lines were etched at the corners of her mouth . . . On hot days, when faces are covered in sweat, the acne on her cheeks reddened and she seems to have no hope”.⁴⁸

In another story in the collection, titled “Kodem Zemano”⁴⁹, the emphasis on Geula as homely and graceless continues: “Her nails are cracked, her hands are rough and scabby, and there are two bitter creases at the corners of her mouth. Her

⁴⁴Oz, 1965, p. 38.

⁴⁵ See: Schwartz, Hayadata, 2007, p. 405; Wilfe, Michael: “Mi Haj Ad Navadim: Al Hasipur ‘Navadim Vatzefa.”, in: *Davar* (1974), pp. 2–3.

⁴⁶Oz, 1992, p. 32.

⁴⁷Deegan, Dorothy Yost: *The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels*. New York 1975, p. 105.

⁴⁸Oz, 1992, p. 28.

⁴⁹Translated into English as “Before His Time”. I am using quotes from the English version found in Amos Oz *Where the Jackals Howl and Other Stories*.

legs are thin and pale and covered with a down of black hairs. That is why she always wears trousers, never a skirt or a dress. And although she is now more than twenty years old, there are still adolescent pimples on her cheeks.”⁵⁰

In kibbutz matters, Geula is a cipher. Her contribution is confined to that of preparing coffee for cultural and social meetings, a participation which is not unnoticed by the narrator. With a dollop of irony he points out that although she is still without a husband, her ability to make the finest coffee whenever needed is always appreciated by the members. Importantly, in the main introduction of “Navadim Vatzefa”, the narrator fleetingly refers to her age—twenty-nine—implying that with every passing day her plight worsens, which explains why she is such an embittered and morose character: “I avoid her glance, so as not to have to face her mocking sadness”⁵¹ And in “Kodem Zemano”: “Geula Sirkin, the surviving child of Zeshka and Dov, wakes up in hatred and rises to wash her face under the cold water faucet”.⁵² Rightly, Bachur remarks that Geula represents the epitome of loneliness in the kibbutz.⁵³

Conversely, in “Kodem Zemano”, Geula’s late younger brother is proclaimed as a legend in the army, promoted to a commander of his own battalion at twenty-three. In fact, even after his death, his military exploits are still spoken of with reverence: how he partook in all the reprisal raids, how sick with pneumonia he blew up an Arab police station, and how alone he captured a notorious terrorist and six of his crew. His few visits to the kibbutz “had been a delight to the unmarried girls. And sometimes to the married girls as well. . . . He just burst out laughing and asked why they were all hanging around him, as if they had no homes to go to, as if they had nothing to do”.⁵⁴

In the course of “Navadim Vatzefa,” the male narrator makes it clear that Geula’s solitary state is a situation she is responsible for, since she has spurned his attempts at companionship and has rejected any intimacy: “Sometimes I would rest a conciliatory hand on her neck, and wait for her to calm down. But she never relaxed completely. If once or twice she leaned against me, she always blamed her broken sandal or her aching head. And so we drifted apart”⁵⁵

Thus, what befalls Geula is the fate of all unwed literary heroines, who, having rejected marriage, are left to be scolded and chastised by society. Characteristically, Geula is also segregated and delineated as the ‘social other’, as different: “Geula is not like the rest of the girls in the Kibbutz”⁵⁶. In a similar vein, the youngsters of the kibbutz maliciously snicker at her nocturnal walks in the orchards.

Oz probes the complex dilemma a woman such as Geula faces being unmarried in a community like a Kibbutz, where the institution of the family is paramount. Oz shows how the Kibbutz has outfitted Geula with the archetypal qualities associated

⁵⁰Oz, 1992, p. 65.

⁵¹Oz, 1992, p. 28.

⁵²Oz, 1992, p. 65.

⁵³Yona, Bachur: “Olam shel sin-ha”, in: *Haaretz* (28 May, 1965), p. 13.

⁵⁴Oz, 1992, p. 66.

⁵⁵Oz, 1992, p. 28

⁵⁶Oz, 1992, p. 62.

in fiction with the spinster: sour disposition, spite and lasciviousness.⁵⁷ A related concern is that, as Geula's story is refracted and filtered through a subjective male view, that of the Kibbutz male, what we are left with is a clichéd take on the life of a single woman – a portrayal that certainly has the ring of the stereotype.

Returning briefly to the story's coda. Although the mission to punish the Bedouins appears to be disproportionate, considering the transgressions they are accused of, there are bigger forces at work here. The unlikely cast of unwanted primitive invaders, who inhabits and signify the untamed landscape, burgeon gradually into a subversive, destabilizing element that enters the bloodstream of the kibbutz. The Arabs in the story function as a chaotic catalyst that disrupts the seemingly tranquil, sane, and disciplined nature of the kibbutz. Their arrival unleashes a geyser of suppressed sexual and uncontrollable vicious impulses—normally attributed to the exemplum other, the Arab—that heralds the collapse, or perhaps the weakening, of the kibbutz's moral order. Nurit Gertz remarks on this perennial subtext, evident in the overall bric-a-brac of all the tales:

“In all of the stories in *Artzot Hatan* there is a struggle waged between the representative of civilization (usually a kibbutz member) who lives under the shelter of Zionist ideology and the menacing land and its agents—the jackals, the Arabs, the mountains. This is not a simple conflict between clashing spheres, but a battle between two worlds, each containing the same contradictions: the cultured member embodies wild impulses, and nature is not only a universe of threatening drives but also a world that is meaningful, real and captivating. As the story unfolds, the hero, who is imbued with those very tensions, is pulled between violent interactions with the forces of nature and a return back to the barren life of culture. This occurs until the coda of the narrative, when the destructive encounter ends in catastrophe or resignation. All the protagonists in *Artzot Hatan* are unable to find a home in the lands of the jackal and in the lands of the cultured. They cannot live in the upright world of rules and clichés, but they cannot violate these laws and boundaries since this breaking out brings with it death and devastation. Out of the two choices—death in life or life in death—they cannot choose neither.”⁵⁸

Two images at the end of the story sum up nicely the motif of a battle being waged between the Arab and the Jew, between the seemingly cultured kibbutz life and the savage Bedouin tribe. The first is the band of stick-carrying youngsters marching toward the Bedouin encampment aflame with an almost bestial drive: “Excitement was dilating our pupils. And the blood was drumming in our temples.”⁵⁹ To be sure, this irrational remedy signifies a regression to a physical primitivism and infantile aggression not usually associated with the ethical and civilized image of the kibbutz.

The second is obscured within the fabric of the text and is easy to overlook. As Geula rests among the flowering shrubs, military planes sweep through the night sky, preparing perhaps for a shadowy bombing exercise. The blinking red and green lights of the jets, symbols of Israel's modern might, are contrasted with the earthy

⁵⁷ Rogers, M. Katherine: *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature*, Seattle 1966, p. 203.

⁵⁸ Gertz, Nurit: *Amos Oz: Monografia*, Tel Aviv 1980, p. 93.

⁵⁹ Oz, 1992, p. 38.

singing and drumming of the nomads. An analogy is drawn between the destructive nature of both the planes and the youths on their way to “even the score with the nomads”⁶⁰

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⁶⁰Oz, 1992, p. 38.