

Mothers of Soldiers in Israeli Literature

David Grossman's *To the End of the Land*



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ABSTRACT This article addresses the national-political functions of mainstream Hebrew literature, focusing on three questions: What are soldiers' mothers in the canonical literature "allowed" to think, feel, and do, and what is considered transgressive? How has the presence of soldiers' mothers in Israeli public life changed since the 1982 Lebanon War? At the center of the discussion is David Grossman's novel *To the End of the Land* (2008). I argue that the author posits "the flight from bad tidings" as both a maternal strategy and the author's psychopoetic strategy. This article examines the cultural and gendered significance of the analogy between the act of flight and the act of writing that Grossman advances in his epilogue.

KEYWORDS mothers, soldiers, Hebrew literature, David Grossman

Israel's 1982 war in Lebanon was the first to be perceived as a "war of choice" in Israel, triggering a wave of protest as soon as units of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) crossed the border into Lebanon.¹ Soldiers' parents began to question the judgment of military leaders and to take a critical stance toward their sons' military service. Although criticism of the militarization of Israeli society developed earlier during the 1970s and increased after the 1973 war, the 1982 war in Lebanon marked the first time that public criticism was expressed while fighting was going on. Previously such criticism had emerged only after the end of hostilities.²

Only some years after the combatants' mothers began speaking out about crucial national decisions did they become part of the literary fabric. In the early 1990s, a new protagonist was born: the soldier's mother who moved in from the margins to occupy center stage.³

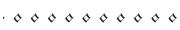
Women's Entry into the Domain of Protest

The public activism of Raya Harnik, mother of Gonyi Harnik, commander of the Golani Brigade, was one of the first mothers to participate in public discourse about military and political decision making.⁴ Gonyi Harnik was killed on the second day of the 1982 Lebanon War, in the battle of the Beaufort. His mother pushed for the formation of a national commission to investigate the procedures that led to the decision to initiate a war in Lebanon (Harnik 1985). She published strongly worded articles against the conduct of the Ministry of Defense's Rehabilitation Department toward bereaved families, engaged in activism demanding the army's withdrawal from Lebanon, and in an uncompromising nine-year-long legal struggle against the IDF, successfully fought to have the inscription "Fell in Operation Peace for Galilee Campaign" on her son's tombstone replaced by the inscription "Fell during the battle on the Beaufort in the Lebanon war" (Lurie 1992, 7).

Inspired by Harnik, other soldiers' mothers — mostly middle-class Ashkenazi women — began to reject their allotted role in the gendered national order and to participate in various domains of public discourse on military policy. The most acclaimed manifestation of this activism is the Arba Imahot (Four Mothers) organization, founded in 1997 following the helicopter disaster.⁵ Arba Imahot pressured the Israeli government to withdraw its military forces from southern Lebanon after more than fifteen years marked by a war of attrition and by occupation. The organization sprang from the same promilitary base as Harnick and other parents who joined protest groups against the war in Lebanon and against the occupation, such as Horim Negeg Shtika (Parents against Silence), Nashim Beshahor (Women in Black), Yesh Gvul (There's a Limit), and Bat Shalom (Daughter of Peace).⁶ The founders of Arba Imahot were mothers of combat soldiers. Their secular, Ashkenazi, and heteronormative identities and their fundamental support for security-based values and the gender-identity structure at the root of Israel's national ideology gave them crucial legitimacy. Still, the emergence of Arba Imahot indicated a real change: it was the first time that mothers of soldiers had organized to sound an opposing and effective voice, which drew its legitimacy from their identity as mothers. They were able to intervene in the security discourse, which had excluded women with only a few exceptions.⁷

The National Model of Proper Motherhood

The intervention of soldiers' mothers in the public sphere and discourse during the 1980s caused the politically and culturally accepted structures of gender and nationality to crack. These changes, along with other processes that unfolded over the course of the 1980s and the 1990s — such as the capitalization of the Israeli economy and the loosening of welfare and other social regulations — sowed the seeds for the Oslo climate. From the start and by design, the Oslo Accords were formulated as a declaration of intentions regarding a willingness to engage in a



dialogue based on trust that would lead to a future change of Israeli-Palestinian relations. The leaders of both sides agreed to delay the discussion of core matters—the status of Jerusalem, refugees’ right of return, the status of the Israeli settlements, and the distribution of resources—until the sides had come closer and trust was created. Lev Grinberg (2007, 10) comments that the agreement’s open-ended character was meant to forge a mood that would then allow the imagination of different possibilities: “Leaving [certain] questions open made it possible for each to *imagine peace* as he liked. That was the great strength of Oslo, but also its main weakness” (emphasis added).

Literature was one of the sites through which this work of the imagination was being produced. Indeed, this short-lived climate was notable in the national-political arena and in cultural products such as the satirical comedy *Hahamishia Hakamerit* (*Chamber Quintet*) and new books by young writers including Ronit Matalon, Uzi Weil, Gadi Taub, Gafi Amir, Etgar Keret, and Orly Castel-Bloom. These writers offered a critical view of social and gender stratification in Israel and dared to imagine situations and conditions beyond the limits of conventional political discourse.

Hence the involvement of women, especially of soldiers’ mothers, in the public discourse on military issues together with the influence of the Oslo climate permeated the era’s literary writing. Israeli literature written before the 1990s teems with combat and noncombat soldiers, alive, wounded, dead—but exceedingly few of these soldiers have mothers who take an active role in their narratives. The few mothers that made it into Israeli literary prose written before the 1990s were mostly bereaved women who did not challenge the ideology that sent their sons to battle and to their deaths. Rather, their characterization followed the hegemonic national norm, observing the strict separation between masculine spheres of action (the army) and the feminine and maternal domains that encompassed care for the soldier on furlough, responsibility for his food and uniform, and heroic and patriotic acceptance of his death.

None of these bereaved “literary mothers” dares to question the justifications that led their sons to fight and lose their lives. They all fit into roughly the same mold—that of Rivka Guber. Guber, a devoted Zionist pioneer who lost her two sons, Ephraim and Zvi, in the 1948 war, is a key example of a mother who faithfully followed the nation’s dictates, both before and after her sons’ deaths. Born in Ukraine, she immigrated to Palestine in 1925 with her husband Mordechai. The couple was among the founders of Kefar Bilu in 1933, later leaving to join Kefar Warburg, where they raised their sons. Guber was motivated by radical ideology to devote herself to any cause that would serve the nation. During World War II, as a forty-year-old mother of three (her daughter Haya was a young girl at the time), Guber volunteered for the British Army’s Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), where she served between 1940 and 1942 along with other Jewish women soldiers. After

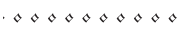
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the loss of her sons, she published two commemorative books: *Sefer Ha'ahim* (*The Book of Brothers*) (Barash 1958) and *Im Habanim* (*With the Sons*, 1953). Books commemorating fighters and soldiers who lost their lives in battle were common and created a sort of national literary genre. Yet Guber was unique in the way she occupied center stage in the books alongside her dead sons.

Guber's status as a paragon of national motherhood resulted from her never exposing a conflict between loyalty to national values and her own suffering. After reading her first book dedicated to her sons, David Ben-Gurion wrote her a letter that praised her courage and commitment to national values. Part of Ben-Gurion's letter was published in the preface to the fourth edition of the book: "From the moment I read what you wrote in *Sefer Ha'ahim* I knew a great mother had emerged in Israel, a mother the likes of which we have not seen in centuries, and whose words are stamped with the immortality of human splendor. . . . With mothers like you in Israel, we can confidently meet our future. With love and acknowledgement, David Ben-Gurion"⁸ (Ben-Gurion 1976, 45). The letter received broad public acclaim. Ben-Gurion made Guber into an ideal of motherhood and sacrifice, but further, he implied a connection between Guber and the archetypal figure of the original "mother of seven sons" from a well-known martyrdom narrative, thus giving Guber's story a mythico-historical dimension.⁹ Even today, this tale is part of the infrastructure of Israeli motherhood, which expects mothers to send their sons to sacrifice their lives without hesitation or objection.

The norms of both Israeli public life and Israeli literature up to the 1990s, inspired in part by Guber and the values she represented, cast bereavement as a mother's entry into the public domain, as she was now a member of the the family of the bereaved, a living memorial of the national struggle. At the same time, this role bound mothers to the hegemonic national myth and the collective identity it entails.¹⁰

The founding of the State of Israel in May 1948 was supposed to have fully realized the national ethos for which the lives of many young people had been sacrificed. The ethos at the core of Zionist aspirations was to establish "a national home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel"¹¹ (*Official Gazette* 1948, 1). The transition from the conception of the state to the state's everyday reality produced a paradoxical movement: Once the state is established, the objective is realized. From then on, the nation's existence is no longer driven by an aspiration to give birth to something sublime like a state. Rather, it becomes based on the defense, conservation, and improvement of what was accomplished (Tsamir 2008, 100–102). Hamutal Tsamir points to "conservations and improvements" in general. National rituals sealed the gendered division of roles characterizing Zionist society as it had evolved over the years of struggle. Despite the tremendous changes since the establishment of the state, gender roles have remained relatively stable. The army has functioned as the main site where these roles are preserved.



The Drama of Motherhood in *To the End of the Land*: Between Fiction and Reality

The few soldiers' mothers who were protagonists in Israeli literature before the 1990s were shaped along the lines of Rivka Guber. Authors did not exploit the space offered by fiction to produce alternatives to gendered narratives and perspectives. In the early 1990s, however, the place of the soldier's mother in Israeli literature started to shift. Some of these new protagonists challenged the authority of the gendered national discourse, while others reaffirmed and even amplified that discourse by adapting it to the needs and circumstances of the present. Dolly, the main protagonist of Orly Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City* (1992), stands out as the most provocative and challenging mother figure of them all, for she is the first in Israeli literature who considers her son's enlistment in the army to represent the culmination of her own educational failure.¹²

David Grossman's *Isha Borahat Mibesora* (*To the End of the Land*) confirms the values of the hegemonic security discourse from the perspective of a soldier's mother. I argue that the book's exceptional success—its translation into many languages and its long-standing rank at the top of the best-seller lists in Israel, Italy, and elsewhere—is due to its perplexing, even deceptive narrative. To be sure, Grossman addresses escapism from Israeli political aspects of reality from the novel's outset. Ora's escapism is described as a maternal strategy and an existential ideology, as indicated in the book's Hebrew title, *A Woman Escapes Bad Tidings*. Ora's decision to evade reality leads to her increasing reflection about nationalism, gender, and a mother's role.

The novel tells the story of Ofer, Ora's son, who reaches the end of his compulsory service and is made to join a military campaign that may result in his death. The story is told from the point of view—and often in the voice—of his mother. Tormented by worries about her son's well-being, Ora goes on a long hike on a hiking trail that runs the length of the country with her son's father, her erstwhile boyfriend and partner, Avram. Will Ora, who had always wished to avoid any political involvement, come to her senses and dare to question her son's participation in a military campaign? Or is her role as a mother limited to looking after him when he is on leave? How should she balance her frustration caused by the clash between the demands of Israeli nationality and her maternal role? The narrative's historical moment is the first years of the new millennium, after the failure of the Oslo Accords and under the occupation.

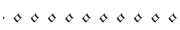
Hugely successful, the novel has been discussed at length by literary critics and by major Israeli journalists who specialize in the political aspects of Israeli reality, rather than in the literary. Nahum Barnea and Ilana Dayan express their admiration of and identification with the book's point of view. It was praised as “the greatest, most important book of the 21st century” and won its author many awards (Melamed 2008). Its political conservatism, however, also has attracted criticism.

Michael Gluzman (2008) understands its sense of Jewish history as one of victimization and political pessimism. Iris Milner (2013) shows how the novel ties in with the biblical myth of Isaac's binding in its cruel Israeli national version, lacking any sublimation in the form of the ram.¹³ The novel's most politically charged aspect concerns the way it constitutes the drama of Israeli motherhood and how Israeli mothers function as active agents of the gendered national order. The question I discuss here addresses the denial mechanisms at work in the formation of Ora's identity as a mother and its metonymic adherence to Israel's gendered national norms in the twenty-first century.

The exceptional interest this novel aroused among Israeli readers was also due to the death of Uri Grossman, the author's son, in the 2006 Lebanon War, during a major ground operation undertaken by the Israeli army after a cease-fire was about to go into effect. On the final page of the book, in a very brief epilogue, Grossman states that he started writing it before the death of his son, adding: "After we finished sitting 'Shiv'a,' I went back to the book. Most of it was already written. What changed, above all, was the echo of the reality in which the final draft was written" (2011 [2008], 653).¹⁴ Indeed, as Michael Gluzman (2008, 1) comments, "Even though the book's plot is fictional, there's a strong feeling that reality has penetrated it, wounding both the novel and its fictionality."

Grossman himself, then, was the first to suggest the liminal nature of the work, hovering between fiction and reality. In the same epilogue he hints at an analogy between himself and the book's protagonist, Ora: "At the time, I had the feeling — or rather, a wish — that the book I was writing would protect him" (Grossman 2011, 653). Ora, too, hopes that her flight from home while her son is away on the military campaign will keep him out of danger: "because notifications always take two — Ora thinks — one to give and one to receive — and there will be no one to receive this notice and so it will not be delivered" (*ibid.*, 104). Ora's decision to escape is presented from the outset as impulsive and irrational: in her own words, "it is a meager and pathetic sort of protest" (*ibid.*, 105). Nevertheless, her flight becomes the narrative's *raison d'être* by explaining the charged context in which the main characters act. It allows Grossman to set into motion a plot in which Avram and Ora have an ongoing dialogue and Ora tells Avram the story of Ofer's life. It also opens up the option — tantalizing and unrealized — that Ora will gain an understanding that will lead her to dare to question the unwritten rules of Israeli motherhood and even to confront them actively. But these expectations are disappointed.

Not only does the identification between Grossman and his maternal character, Ora, take the form of a parental wish to protect their sons with a desperate, unrealistic act of life-saving verbal and bodily magic. Perhaps unwittingly, Grossman draws another analogy between himself and Ora: their implied concession to have only limited power and authority regarding the national order. In Ora's case, she is reduced to avoiding being at home when the announcement of her son's death



arrives. In Grossman’s case, the risks are those involved in writing literature in a cultural context determined by Israel’s hegemonic national ideology. Analogous to Ora, Grossman uses literary writing as a mechanism to escape reality. But the effectiveness of this mechanism is just as doubtful as the steps Ora decides to take in the story’s fictive world. Thus the escape from bad tidings constitutes both a maternal strategy — touching yet ineffective and conformist — and an expression of the author’s renunciation of any possibility that literature may offer new, radical notions of legitimate parenting to the Israeli national scene.¹⁵

To the End of the Land—Gendered Denial Strategies

The analogy linking Grossman to Ora is also gendered. Grossman writes about escape even as his book “escapes”—or perhaps returns—to modes of representing motherhood and femininity that had started to come undone in Israeli public life in the 1980s and in Israeli literature in the 1990s. Here again I refer to Castel-Bloom, whose *Dolly City* (1992) centers on the unforgettable figure of a mother who is both psychotic and the last sane person in a world that has gone crazy. More than any other book in Israeli literature, *Dolly City* marks a radical change characterized by a new and poignant consciousness of the cost of national repression in the context of motherhood. Grossman presents his readers with a mother figure who is allegedly as promising as Dolly regarding her perspective on Israeli militarism, albeit much more reliable and psychologically complex. She has concrete memories and dreams, and is embedded in reality. However, as she emerges over the course of the text, Ora takes shape as an allegorical figure personifying the psychic structure imposed on mothers of soldiers. The book’s tracing of her life’s narrative can be compared to a journey to this psyche’s very roots, from the present back into the past. This journey can be read as a genealogy of how a creative and independent-minded girl is transformed into a woman who obeys the rules of the existing gendered national order, one that her escape confirms.

Over the course of the novel it becomes clear that escape, repression, and turning a blind eye to the more charged aspects of the national reality are facets of an existential strategy Ora has been using for a long time. One obvious expression of such a strategy is the way she has tried to keep her private home separate from the national domain. Ora begins the journey that leads to her hike to the Galilee in a taxi driven by Sami, the family’s “chauffeur.” During the drive, Ora remembers the old house in Jerusalem’s Ein Karem neighborhood where she and Ilan had lived. The owners, whose identity is not mentioned—and so they are obviously Jews whose self-evident identity needs no specification—responded positively to a letter Ora wrote to them about the house, and the owners sold the house to Ilan and Ora, who lived and raised their children there (Grossman 2011, 117).

Ein Karem was built on the ruins of an Arab village, Ayn Karim, the largest in the Jerusalem district in terms of its physical size and population. Historians claim

that many of its Arab residents fled in the wake of the Deir Yassin massacre of April 1948, followed by another exodus after the Israeli army besieged the village in July 1948 (Morris 1991, 283; see also Khalidi 1992; Kadman 2015).¹⁶ In December 1948, after Israel was founded, Jewish families moved into the village, which was subsequently incorporated into the municipality of Jerusalem. Ora, in her wish to escape complex situations that force her to question the seemingly natural distinctions between private and public and between family life and national existence, avoids any thoughts about the larger history of her home and the neighborhood. As far as she is concerned, the history of the house began when she encountered it. Appropriately, then, she describes the house as “empty and closed up” (Grossman 2011, 117), a phrase that resonates with the Zionist myth about the empty land—“a land without people”—that is awaiting the return of its sons, who represent “a people without a land.”

These longings for the old house in Ein Karem beset Ora as she travels in the taxi on its way to a makeshift hospital for the children of Palestinian refugees to which Sami is driving a sick boy. In the past, this boy's family might have lived in Ayn Karim, but the irony of the situation is lost on Ora. For years, her ability to push out of sight any reminder of the “big” history that links her and her private home to the “situation,” as Israelis like Ora tend to call it, has allowed her to live with the feeling that she and Ilan have managed to make themselves “a quiet, private life,” dodging all interference and danger from outside. Still, in one of their many conversations, she tells Avram that she would be regularly assailed by a fear that her quiet, private life might be upset: “Once a week or so, I would wake up with a panic attack and say quietly into Ilan's ear: ‘look at us. Aren't we like a little underground cell in the heart of the ‘situation’?’” (ibid., 299). The image of the family as an autarkic economy, an autonomous underground system that bears no relation to the rampant violence and hatred surrounding it, enables Ora to maintain her belief that she need not appeal to violence, nor must she carry any responsibility for it: regarding herself and her family as sealed off from the violence, she can also tell herself they are protected from it. Ora, that is, tells herself a clean, pure story that is blind to its own hegemonic nature and the privilege at its core. Anxiety, however, enters the scene as a disruptive force and serves as a constant, albeit denied, reminder that the underground cell at the heart of the “situation” is a time bomb.

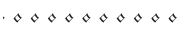
Ilan is also fully complicit in this transformation of the Ein Karem house into an extension of Ora's selfhood by means of the total denial of its charged past: “Ilan let her nurture and tame the house as she wished” (ibid., 117). Their mutual understanding about everything concerning the home paints Ora's disregard for national history in a typically gendered hue, reflecting the ancient Mishnaic byword “His home is his wife” (Yoma 1:1). Ora is an enthusiastic agent of the Jewish patriarchal order in its Israeli version, which identifies the woman with the home and the man with the world outside. As Ilan “lets” Ora manage the home, he, too, consents to

intimacy, which fuels the strength to be nonconformist. The story Ada writes turns into a metaphorical baby she and Ora have together, the fruit of their love, and an expression of their profound intimacy.

The physical similarity between Ora and Ada—they are both redheads—underlines Ada's dual role in the narrative: until her death, she exists as a subject who is separate and distinct from Ora. Nevertheless, after her death, Ada serves as a symbolic representation of certain latent and subversive aspects in Ora's personality that will preoccupy her throughout her life. Ada's death also forecloses for Ora the possibility of having any kind of intimacy with another woman, as well as the possibility, which had been signaled by Ada, to *be* "another" sort of woman, one present in the world and acting in it with the ability and the intention to influence its rules. After Ada's death and up through the time of the novel's present when Ora is a woman in her fifties, Ora forms no close attachment to any other woman. This flight from intimacy with other women is closely and directly associated with Ora's refusal to separate from Ada. Ora refuses to attend Ada's funeral and does not visit Ada's parents during or after the Shiv'a. She shares the view of her own parents and believes, as Iris Milner notes (2013, 325–26), that since Ada's parents are Holocaust survivors, the best way of coping with this terrible loss is to ignore it and to behave as if nothing had happened.

Denying Ada's death, however, does not release Ora from it. Through melancholic identification, Ada becomes a permanent presence in Ora's soul, suggesting forbidden gendered possibilities. In Judith Butler's (1997) terms, Ora's gender identity emerges in the wake of her cruel separation from Ada, the possibilities the latter represented for her, and in consonance with heterosexual gender logic, according to which "I never loved her—I never lost her."¹⁷ Ora's identity as a heteronormative woman is bound up with her denial of her separation from a female figure she had loved, accompanied by a grave prohibition to mourn this separation. Ora becomes a woman who dedicates her life to her men: her two sons, her husband, and Avram, the biological father of one of her sons. She helps these men express their creativity and realize themselves. As a girl and young woman she functions as Avram's muse, and on their hike along the cross-Israel trail, she busies herself with healing him, as Milner (2013) has remarked. As an adult woman, she makes the home she shares with Ilan, infusing it with domestic warmth and stability. Her professional career as a physiotherapist involves caring for others. She will not invent any more stories or set any new rules; instead, she will religiously observe the dictates of Israeli motherhood. That is, she will not challenge or take an active position toward the national order, even if, being a mother, she is often acutely aware of its dangers.

The fear that grips Ora when Ofer sets out on his military operation is related to the psychic mechanism D. W. Winnicott (1974, 103) refers to in his description of the fear of breakdown: "Fear of breakdown is the fear of a breakdown that has



already been experienced. . . . It is the death that happened but was not experienced that is sought.” Having been caught unprepared for Ada’s death, Ora will not be surprised this time. But she is destined to find herself stuck in the same horrible helplessness that she experienced in the past, unable to escape. Her flight from bad tidings about Ofer is an attempt to undo something that already happened — Ada’s death — and this is why it is an impossible, inherently frustrated act.¹⁸ Separation from Ada and the consequent separation from the creative mental powers to invent a different femininity for herself, one that does not reproduce what is self-evident, becomes a survival instinct that swallows her up, keeping other possibilities out of view. Thus Ada’s death is an external but necessary expression of the process whereby Ora becomes a proper woman. This process is grounded in a violent inner disconnection from those forces that, due to their anarchic and creative components, are in charge of disturbing the order and casting doubt on its validity. Ada is frequently present in Ora’s psyche, and to avoid contact with the pain involved in their separation caused by Ada’s death, Ora frequently struggles in inner dialogue with her, doing all she can to expel her from consciousness.

When Ora visits the makeshift clinic in Jaffa with Sami and the sick child, suddenly the thought strikes her that she herself has accompanied her son to the war and has thereby actively colluded in something that may lead to his death. Her unexpected consciousness is rendered and underlined by a form of textual fragmentation that bestows a new prosodic quality to the flow of her thoughts, imitating the blows of a hammer or a round of gunshots. Each thought strikes her forcefully and relentlessly:

What have I done.
 I took Ofer to war.
 I brought him to the war myself.
 And if something happens to him.
 And if that was the last time I touched him. . . .
 I took him there.
 I didn’t stop him. I didn’t even try. (Grossman 2011, 122–23)

The understanding that she has failed to stop her son cuts through her thoughts in hindsight, after she has abandoned him to his fate. Her belated comprehension reveals her dissociated conduct in real time, and this arouses her own resistance, perplexity, and even anger, which flares up briefly to question this mode of behavior. These critical thoughts, however, are abruptly suppressed in order to allow for another, old-new narrative to take their place, a story that will assuage Ora and restore the old picture that had been momentarily troubled. Ora feels impelled to give voice to this appeasing narrative; she shares it with an old Arab woman she meets in the Jaffa clinic. The old woman looks at her with kind eyes, but it is not clear

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whether she understands Ora. In this rare moment of intimacy with a woman (an ironic occasion, since the latter probably doesn't understand Hebrew), Ora tells her about one of her friends who decided to abort a fetus with Down syndrome. Against all expectations, the fetus lived for fifteen minutes after the abortion. Her friend had asked if she could hold the baby in her arms, and she told Ora how she tried to give him all the love and warmth she could until he died, while being fully aware that the decision to terminate his life had been her own. Recollecting this story, Ora compares her own predicament to that of her friend:

"And what do I have to complain about?" Ora continued in a cracked voice. "I held my child for twenty-one years — *wakhad wa-ashrin sana*," she says in the tentative Arabic she remembers from high school, "but they went by so quickly, and I barely had time to do anything with him, but now that his army is finished we could have really started." Her voice breaks but she pulls herself together. "Come on, ma'am, let's get out of here, please take me to Sami." (ibid., 124)

The shocking realization that she did nothing to stop her son from participating in the military campaign, that she did not even try to persuade him to do otherwise, is rapidly replaced by another narrative, the implied hegemonic national train of thought that suggests that Ora was lucky to have received (from whom? from the nation?) temporary ownership of her child and that she should be happy to have had him for a relatively long stretch of time. In other words, she, like her friend, takes part in the killing of her child as a result of conventions that call for such killing (no less than that), but unlike her friend, she has had the good fortune to keep her son for many years — something for which she should be grateful.

To the End of the Land as a Moral Tale

Ora's rapid return to the national-maternal ranks and the quick dismissal of "heretical thoughts" about preventing Ofer from joining the campaign are evidence that she has learned a lesson regarding an earlier, dramatic event, an incident that also relates to Ofer's military service. While he was stationed in Hebron, under curfew, Ofer and his fellow soldiers caught an old and apparently mentally deranged Arab man who was put into the refrigerator room at the military base and forgotten about. Eventually he was released, still alive. Upon hearing about this incident and the ensuing military investigation, Ora is beside herself. For the first time in her adult life she breaks the unwritten rules to which she had hitherto adhered, directly and relentlessly confronting her family. Ora's anger in turn sparks Ilan's and Ofer's rage. Ilan accuses Ora of betraying her son by confronting him with his responsibility for the Arab's man incarceration in the refrigerator room: "Listen, you're his mother, right? You're the only mother he has, and he needs you unconditionally now, do you understand? You're his mother, you're not some Mother for Peace, okay?"

didn't know yet then / That the occupation would always be." She adds ironically, as if with nostalgia:

How young it was, the occupation,
Solely made up of women bent over tomatoes
In the *moshavs*, men with plastic carrier bags.

Hanan Hever (2007) mentions the elusive entrenchment of the occupation in Israeli consciousness as a temporary condition and discusses the dangers associated with the protracted illusion it enables. Hever draws attention to the fact that the bleak and static political situation at present relies on the support of Israeli culture, including Israeli literature, which reaffirms existing orders and values and—consciously or not—tries to deepen their hold. One way of confirming the existing order mentioned by Hever is the blurring of the distinction between culture and entertainment and the insertion of typical characteristics of entertainment into what is considered high culture.

Indeed, popular culture and Israeli mainstream literature collaborate in softening the harsher aspects of the current reality even if they do this work in different ways. The entertainment onslaught provided by reality shows and comedy shows has escapist qualities that allow the public to believe the occupation is happening elsewhere, far away in space and time from the part-Mediterranean, part-Western experience on screen. In marked contrast, mainstream Israeli literature is not escapist and deals with the grand questions of national identity. But it does so in a manner that can be likened to immunization: the threatening factor—in this case, awareness of the occupation and the moral corruption it entails—is introduced in an extremely diluted form into the literary corpus; the immune system “learns” it and subsequently produces the appropriate antibodies. In *Hazman Hatsahov* (*The Yellow Wind*), Grossman (1988, 212–13) confesses, as it were, how he became “an artist of sublimation” regarding the moral quandaries raised by the occupation: “Like so many others, I began to think of that kidney-shaped expanse of land, the West Bank, as an organ transplanted into my body against my wishes and about which soon, when I had time, I would come to some sort of conclusion and decision. Of course, that transplanted organ continued to produce antibodies in my consciousness.”¹⁹ Twenty years on, it seems that Ora’s body has accepted the transplant and learned to live with remorse. Collective Israeli awareness of the occupation and its moral corruption, whose perplexing emergence Grossman describes in *The Yellow Wind*, had since been rejected by the “national body” through processes of weakening and numbing the consciousness.

To The End of the Land portrays Ora as a projection, a figure who behaves according to a male fantasy of obedient femininity and national-normative motherhood, and not as a woman who casts doubt on the prevailing notions about gender

and security. And so the stability of the existing order becomes a positive value in need of protection. *To the End of the Land* is a work that confirms the value of its protagonists' standard notions of identity. Despite her shock, anxiety, and flight, Ora does not rebel. She rarely confronts the rules of the national game or the role of the national mother whose task is to raise fighters. Ora continues a gendered national literary and cultural tradition that sanctions the separation between men and women, between fathers and mothers, and excessively defers to a sense of (Ashkenazi) men's license to be in charge.

Yet the book points to fissures in the hegemonic logic, allowing a glimpse of liberation and at the same time fraught options in terms of gender and sexuality. By focusing on these fissures and reading Grossman's book against itself, I have attempted to dramatize these potential options, these roads not taken, and have pointed to Ora's latent consciousness regarding the occupation and its repression.

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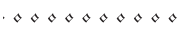
I wish to thank Michal Arbell and Iris Milner for commenting on earlier drafts of this article. I am grateful to the anonymous readers for their very helpful and illuminating suggestions. This article is a part of my current research on mothers of soldiers in the Hebrew literature from the turn of the nineteenth century until the present.

Notes

1. Most historians currently hold the view that the so-called Sinai Campaign (Mivtsa Kadesh) in 1956 was also a "war of choice," one initiated by Israel (see Laron 2009). Even so, the 1982 Lebanon War was the first to be publicly recognized at the time of the fighting.
2. A partial explanation of this phenomenon lies in the homogeneous and hegemonic ethnic and gender characteristics of the Israeli "peace camp." Sara Helman (1999, 293) points to its Ashkenazi, middle-class origin and argues that it is a paradoxical phenomenon: "The Israeli peace camp comprises an array of organizations that since the 1970s has conducted a sustained challenge to the military policies of the state and has striven for the de-escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The intriguing aspect of the phenomenon is that the main organizations of the Israeli peace camp display militaristic symbols and skillfully appeal to the symbolic package of Israeli civil militarism."
3. I am thinking of the shattered mothers in Yehudit Hendel's *Har Hato'im (The Mountain of Losses)*, 1991; the figure of Dolly in Orly Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City* and Mandy in the same author's *Textil* (2005); Esther Ballalo in Gafi Amir's story "Lahayal hakhi hatikh betsahal" ("To

the Most Stunning Guy in the IDF"; 1997); Rachela in Batya Gur's *Even tachat even (A Stone for a Stone)*; 1998); Eytan's mother in Savyon Liebrecht's novella *Hayeled shel Diana (Diana's Child)*; 2000); the characters of Yakuta and Julie in Sammy Bardugo's novella *Ahi hatsair Yehuda (My Younger Brother Yehuda)*; 2006); the figure of Yehudit in Yaniv Ickovits's novel *Dofek (Heartbeat)*; the mother in Emanuel Pinto's novel *Tinnitus* (2009); and the figure of Mira-Norma in Haggai Linik's novel *Darush Lahshan (Prompter Needed)*; 2011).

4. The Golani Brigade is one of five regular-service infantry brigades of the IDF.
5. The helicopter disaster occurred on February 4, 1997, when two helicopters, which were supposed to have crossed the border into Israel's security zone in Lebanon, collided while waiting for official clearance. The accident claimed the lives of seventy-three IDF soldiers.
6. Arba Imahot in this sense picked a tradition with deep roots among Israeli protest movements, which had always displayed their militarist values as a way to uphold the moral justification of their protest (see Helman 2006). For more on the militarist cultural component fundamental to Israeli identity and that lies at the heart of local protest groups such as Arba Imahot, see Helman's essay (2006) and the work of Orna Sasson-Levy (2006).
7. See more on the exclusion of women in Metzger 2009. Although Israeli women are required to enlist in the military, they had traditionally been given "feminine" roles as helpers for male soldiers and commanders, thereby reinforcing gender dichotomies (Sasson-Levi 2006). Moreover, the enrollment of women in the IDF and the fact that a woman, Golda Meir, was once prime minister nourished the false myth of gender equality in Israel, which lies at the roots of the Zionist movement. However, as Izraeli (1984), Bernstein (1987), Melman (1997), and others have taught us, this myth rests on an extremely shaky factual foundation. Women were indeed encouraged to be a part of the national movement but at the same time were directed toward fulfilling their traditional roles, thus allowing men to devote themselves to their new national missions.
8. In this context of sons' enlistment and their mothers' support, another statement by Ben-Gurion must be mentioned: "May every Hebrew mother know that she has put her son under the care of commanders who are up to the task" (1971, 374). Ben-Gurion made this remark at the IDF's Command Conference in July 1963 and in so doing inaugurated the gendered division of roles that underlies the normative national ethos: here mothers "entrust" their sons to their military commanders, who take over the task of caring for them.
9. On the Jewish history of the narrative of Hannah and her seven sons, see Baumgarten and Kushelevsky 2006, 301-2.
10. On the myth of the family of the bereaved and the evolving attitudes toward it on the part of bereaved families, see Witztum and Malkinson 1993.
11. First mentioned in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, this formulation is cited in the historical section of the Declaration of Independence: "This right was recognized in the Balfour Declaration of the 2nd November, 1917, and re-affirmed in the Mandate of the League of Nations which, in particular, gave international sanction to the historic connection between the Jewish people and Eretz-Israel and to the right of the Jewish people to rebuild its National Home" (from the official translation by Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs: mfa.gov.il).
12. For an extensive discussion of the notion of motherhood vis-à-vis national sentiments in Castel-Bloom's work, see Olmert 2013.
13. "And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said: 'Abraham, Abraham.' And he said: 'Here am I.' And he said: 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me'" (Genesis 22:10-12).



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