

“The World is There and We are Here:”

“Otherness” and the Designation of Space in the Prose of Nava Semel

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Abstract

Nava Semel’s (1954-2017) fiction seeks to portray the oppression of “others” as part of a white male system that excludes those who are different by use of violent means, and the main depictive tool which Semel employs in her works is *geographical space*. Accordingly, she presents a variety of locations and affinities related to the oppression of “others” in alternating spaces—urban, peripheral, supervised and space-off. Due to the absence of a space where the “other” can hope to find autonomy, and since utopia is unrealizable, he or she is left with very few tools of survival. Some of these are solidarity with additional “others,” providing descriptive accounts—written or other—that perpetuate the marginally-perceived identity while granting it a genuine place, or the stark acceptance of one’s identity despite the painful price it exacts. In Nava Semel’s prose, the protagonists may visit or chance upon numerous places, their travels may appear to be potentially threatening (“Private Holocaust”), or as facilitating growth and reconciliation (*Australian Wedding*), or the leading character may appear to settle down and live a sheltered life (in Israel, for example, in the novel, *And the Rat Laughed*). Semel’s writings may focus on providing professional fulfillment or defying gender norms (a female candidate for the United States presidency in the novel, *Isra Isle*), or even on an opportunity to become familiar with the world of a beloved yet baffling family member (*Isra Isle*, third part, as well as *Australian Wedding*). In any case, setting out on a journey poses a challenge to the protagonist’s world as well as to the inhabitants of the space of his or her destination. This confrontation between the “other” and the hegemony, as presented in this article, is at the core of Semel’s prose.

Introduction: Radical Geography and Hegemonic Relations—The Conceptualization of “Otherness”

Virginia Woolf’s famous essay, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929),¹ was essentially the opening shot in the groundbreaking study of the relationship between gender and space. Her belief was that women could fulfill themselves provided they had their own private space (e.g., their own room as opposed to the public family room) and some type of annuity.² Woolf stripped bare the structure of the relationship between a woman’s career and space, and subsequently emphasized the importance of the need for an autonomous place of her own. She did not only discuss the essence of this space in terms of women writers, but also how space was necessary in order to perform *any* act of doing, making, or creating that did not involve their identity as women members of the family. In *A Room of One’s Own*, she sought to put an end to the *spatial oppression* that arose

from the very denial of the *private* (and not only the public) realm from women. If the well-worn spatial discourse commonly focused on the dichotomous separation between the “private realm” (the house) and the “sphere of public authority”³ (the workplace), then Woolf challenged this typology and demonstrated that the private realm could also be a sphere of public authority for women if they were consigned a room of their own. Otherwise, the woman was like a guest in her own house, and in the absence of a room of her own, she could not work—i.e., primarily create for her *own* needs—but rather was limited to household and family tasks. In this fashion, Woolf essentially resolved the “home-work” conflict for, as she saw it, a woman could work and create in her own home and was not forced to breach the public space in order to realize her professional identity. In Woolf’s view, the denial of spatial access to women began in their own homes, and the public realm simply reproduced this pattern.

A feminist study of the process of composing literature requires a thematic and aesthetic discussion of the manner in which male and female writers construct female characters together with the author’s representations of women’s life experiences. A feminist examination of literary texts promotes further discussion by employing the theory of *radical geography*, which analyzes *space* using feminist and post-colonialist tools. The analysis of spatial representation in literary works reveals that space⁴ is in fact an additional “character” which fills a role in the story; hence, the manner in which space is structured—and its role in the story’s fabric—is crucial for understanding the ideology that emerges from the text, whether hegemonic or feminist.

Space shapes and reproduces social power relations and also plays a role in many different contexts. A spatial conflict may arise regarding the specific spatial separation between two agents, and the definition of the area that each side controls. This conflict is resolved when the two characters agree on a designated separation. A change then takes place in the identity and functioning of the characters as well as in the relations between them, so that rivalry does not resume when they meet in the future. Therefore, space acquires meaning assigned to it by people who are active within its confines. Without people and their actions, space lacks distinction and is

therefore meaningless. Space is a basic dimension of our material existence and dictates ways of comprehending and identifying reality and our place in it.⁵

Space also delineates patterns of governance and social supervision. For example, the separation between a developed center and a struggling periphery is in effect both an ideological and hierarchical separation between regions and the social categories they represent. This separation sustains the hegemonic power and is vital to its existence and preservation.⁶ According to Homi Bhabha’s typology,⁷ the purpose of colonial discourse is to construct subjects as an inferior type of population on the basis of their racial origin in order to justify occupation and reinforce administrative and pedagogic systems.⁸

In contrast to spatial separation, there is a homophilic tendency which, in the spatial context, is when people form in groups with those who are similar to them. At the same time, these groups of homophilic individuals keep their distance (both spatially and culturally) from individuals perceived as “others.” Members of these groups feel safe in a specified space but are threatened whenever they circulate in an area that is labeled by them as “dangerous” or “different.”⁹ Complementarily, the “other” is not only excluded from the hegemonic space and relegated to the periphery, the periphery and its members also help the hegemony define itself in relation to its antithetical signpost of the “other.”¹⁰

Spatial separation is one of the elements of control in a binary social order.¹¹ For example, spatial differentiation may be established by setting up boundaries that separate the hegemony from the “others.” However, boundaries may be challenged by engaging in “improper” behavior which encroaches upon the hegemonic division of space, thus providing the “other” with an opportunity to protest against the spatial totality created by the hegemonic construction. This behavior (such as a beggar entering a mall, an entrance that defies the exclusive purpose of the space) opens up the spatial division for social negotiations.¹²

For spaces that fall outside the hegemony’s dualistic definition of space, Teresa de Lauretis¹³ uses the term “space-off” which she borrowed from film theory. This indicates the area that can be found in the unexploited spaces in between the operational regions of power-based

institutions within the hegemonic domain.¹⁴ Accordingly, reality may consist of a *hybridity* of two areas, and cannot be simply observed from a binary division perspective. This type of space can be regarded as an assortment of remnants from various patterns of life. It is also termed the “third space.”¹⁵ This space produces phenomena that the hegemony finds hard to control and subjugate on the basis of its typical norms. While the hegemony is invested in maintaining spatial binarity (a derivative of the binary view between women and men), the “third space” eliminates the binary division as well the restrictions imposed on the individual by virtue of this division.¹⁶

The concept of a “third space” as a fragmentary concept that defies binarity demonstrates that there are differences not only between men and women but also between women and other women as well as men and other men. The formerly simple binarity becomes more complex, and anti-hegemonic concepts are introduced into the discourse. Relationships are no longer between man and woman, weak and strong, inside and outside, but rather include the existence of other aspects of life (black-white, homo-hetero) that construct a hybrid space.¹⁷

In this article, several literary works by the radical feminist¹⁸ author, Nava Semel, will be presented. Semel’s literary oeuvre has not yet been subject to an intra-textual analysis¹⁹. Her writings are characterized by a changing dynamic of space which distinguish her from authors who are associated with a more prevalent space, such as the urban space in Orly Castel-Bloom’s texts and the peripheral space in Meir Shalev’s books. This aspect in part explains the difficulty involved in defining her works.²⁰ Semel’s tendency to alter spatial foci and present core spaces alongside peripheral areas, regulated spaces alongside “space-offs” that enable subversive activity, as well as the inclusion of motifs that involve a constant confrontation between “nature” and “culture”—all these give rise to two basic questions in the spirit of radical geography: Is there indeed a difference between core and periphery in the attitude toward “others,” and do space-offs in fact promote a relative autonomy of the “other” by allowing a containment of differences? These questions will be raised in the discussion of five works by Semel, i.e., two early short stories, “Hat of Glass” and “Private Holocaust,” and three novels, *And the Rat Laughed*, *Isra Isle (or IsraIsland)*, and *Australian Wedding*.

Nature versus Culture in the Novel *Isra Isle*²¹

Nava Semel’s book, *Isra Isle*, presents the classic confrontation between “nature” and “culture,” which subsequently obfuscates the clash between the hegemony and “others.” In cultural terms, this is evidenced in embedded practices whereas in spatial terms, this is manifested in more overt ways. Simone de Beauvoir²² noted the tension between nature and culture when she stated:

But Nature inspires ambivalent feelings in man, as has been seen. He exploits it, but it crushes him; he is born from and he dies in it; it is the source of his being and the kingdom he bends to his will; [...] it is contingency and Idea, finitude and totality; [...] Both ally and enemy, it appears as the dark chaos from which life springs forth, as this very life, and as the beyond it reaches for...²³

For de Beauvoir, the clash between nature and culture reflects the paternalistic attitude of man who seeks to escape from his roots and the body he was born with, which is perceived as dark and associated with chaos. At the same time, it reflects his yearning for “culture” whose role is to conceal manifestations of “otherness” and femininity. According to de Beauvoir,²⁴ the prohibitions deriving from the taboos that surround women are meant to keep them away from nature, and the various religious ceremonies are designed to discourage contact between women, the land, and flesh in favor of “cultural” codes. An illustration of her argument can be found in the academic work authored by Aliza Shenhar²⁵ who refers to Jewish culture as “a strict culture of classification which does not allow deviation from boundaries, [and] only those who have accepted the yoke of the Torah emerge from the crude and undefined realm of nature and enter the defined realm of culture.”²⁶ The male in the patriarchal-religious order personifies the role of culture, domestication and control, whereas the woman personifies nature, which must be restrained.²⁷

While de Beauvoir and Shenhar use feminist terminologies in order to explain how patriarchy works to suppress women who are identified with the concept of nature, postcolonial theories present this conflict in a different fashion. According to David Sibley, the natural space has an ongoing historical association with the concept of “otherness.” Political history demonstrates how urban societies harbor feelings of superiority toward peoples who inhabit undomesticated nature, and subsequently regard these peoples as “primitive.” The process in which certain countries took control over foreign lands and nations, while considering themselves

“saviors” of these “primitive” peoples, did not only include the “introduction” of Christian religion, but also re-socialization in terms of education, style of dress, and, in particular, removing the conquered peoples from nature (e.g., in Australia and Canada).²⁸

Bhabha²⁹ discusses the misleading, sham role of Europeans and other occupiers in relation to populations under colonial domination. Occupiers presented the domination process, which employed moral and normative ideologies, as vital to the locals and claimed it would ease and improve their conditions. Colonialist rulers also regarded themselves as driven by a “mission of civilizing the natives.”³⁰ These pretenses become even more evident in Semel’s book, *Isra Isle*, which prima facie presents an encounter between the representative of one hegemony and another in the novel’s first plot.³¹

Taking place in 2001, the first story involves police investigator, Simon T. Lenox, who searches for a missing Israeli by the name of Liam Emanuel. The latter was a former military officer who fought in several Israeli wars and also aspired to serve in the Knesset. On the face of it, Semel seems to adopt the narrative model of the “suspense story,” which customarily focuses on an investigator who must crack a mystery. However, in the novel, *Isra Isle*, “tracing the footsteps” is also metaphorical since Lenox’s efforts to find Emanuel are in fact a journey in which he searches for his own roots. Lenox’s ancestors, it turns out, belonged to a Native-American tribe, including his grandmother, who lived on a reservation. Lenox chose to cut himself off from both tribal beliefs and nature in favor of urban life. In his role as police investigator, Lenox adopts the motto, “running backwards while looking forward,”³² which meant that as the investigation progresses, he gradually advances toward his previously repressed roots. His early resignation from the police force involves a conscious decision to no longer deny his roots and instead break away from the hegemony that also forced him to cover up his past. In fact, he chooses to resign from a substantial position of authority that his status, function, and prolonged service in the force had accorded him. This position is even more pronounced by the physical location of his office in the Twin Towers, which allows him a vantage point high above the rest of the world instead of being a simple object of observation. He prefers to resign for the sake of self-acceptance, which is

reflected in his decision to try and recover his grandmother’s pipe. The process is taken to its conclusion when he carries out the burial ritual of his tribe by relocating his grandmother’s bones and when he finally comes to terms with his full name—Simon T(eibele)³³ Lenox.

The hidden meaning of the T in his name is revealed to be a feminine name—Teibele (Little Dove or Little Pigeon in Yiddish). Lenox accepts this feminine aspect of himself that penetrates his very roots and is embodied in the wisdom of his grandmother. Her wisdom accompanies him in his visions and her words come back to him the moment he stops struggling with his identity. Lenox, a three-time divorcee, suddenly thinks about bringing a child into the world—a sign that his identity is no longer open-ended and he is ready and able to impart it to the next generation.

Just as Simon Lenox, the Native American police commander, is essentially an “other” living among urban whites who fraudulently acquired indigenous lands, the object of his investigation, Liam Emanuel, who is the son of a Holocaust survivor and the father of a born-again Jew, is also an “other.” This is additionally reflected in Emanuel’s decision to flee his native country, Israel, and destiny for Grand Island, the island that was supposed to solve the “Jewish question” and prevent the annihilation of the Jews (this idea is based on a true conception elaborated in footnote 38 and in the pages below). The two protagonists are both part of a long-running spatial conflict: the dispossession of indigenous peoples on one hand, and the elimination of the Jewish people in Europe, on the other. The spatial conflict is exacerbated in the Jewish case *after* the Holocaust because the State of Israel has finally been established, but it remains in constant conflict with the Palestinians. Semel’s text vividly illustrates: “A country, unlike a piece of clothing, does not have elastic qualities and its borders cannot be stretched or shrunk on a whim.”³⁴ This statement is tinged with irony since the State of Israel is essentially in a state of conflict also due to the dispute over the definition of its borders. This issue has accompanied Israel since day one, both as a result of the fluctuating dispositions of surrounding nations and due to developments among Israelis themselves.

A “bloody résumé”³⁵ is a characteristic of the two countries discussed in the novel—Israel and the United States, and the story’s culmination in the Twin Towers disaster shatters the cliché

about New York being the “safest place in the world.”³⁶ In this reality, the two men turn their backs on the concept of “culture,” which is associated with an inherent abuse of power and the dispossession of “others,” and in consequence Emanuel leaves Israel for Grand Island and Lenox resigns from his position. It has become clear to the latter that he has internalized his grandmother’s beliefs regarding circular space and circular time. Lenox’s and Emanuel’s decision to opt for “nature” is a spatial as well as ethical choice. It derives from the desire to cut themselves off from power-abusive principles that are portrayed as “cultural” together with their aspiration to reclaim their identity instead of attiring themselves with an assumed identity in order to satisfy the hegemony. The protagonist “other,” who tried to become a police superintendent yet was always aware of the paternalistic glances directed at him because he was Native American, resolves to leave the institution. This decision accordingly ties in with another development—he allows himself to love the “other” Jewish woman at his workplace, Jackie Brendel. The liberation from “culture” therefore opens a window of opportunity for his repressed drives, but the effort does not bode well because “culture” is stronger than nature and Lenox meets his death in the Twin Towers catastrophe.

The State of Israel, just like the United States, demands that its citizens embrace the “melting pot” ethos. In Israel, this is part of the Zionist ethos which, inter alia, seeks to reject several distinctions of the Diasporic Jew,³⁷ e.g., the Yiddish language and Torah studies. Liam Emanuel, whose son has made the formidable transition from secular to ultra-Orthodox Jew, does not accept this act of “going backwards,” but, at the end of the day, the father ironically makes a choice comparable to that of his son—he abandons the future for the sake of the past. Liam’s arrival at Grand Island reminds the reader of how his son, Tor, turns his back on progress and returns to his roots. The Native American indigenous people of the United States also had to adapt to the “wounds inflicted by the white conquerors”³⁸ and to the capitalist culture that often tritely transforms nature into a commercial or lucrative picturesque wedding site, such as the Niagara Falls, where Lenox ultimately found Emanuel. Lenox’s understanding that his grandmother was wronged, that she was uprooted from her land, and the actions that removed her from her culture were essentially a sin, provokes him to want to draw a new border between himself and the

hegemony. He now realizes that he is not one of their kind, because the place he considers his home is regarded by the hegemony as a casino.

The choice made by Liam Emanuel, a fictional descendant of the true-life figure, Mordecai Manuel Noah,³⁹ to make the journey to the island and abandon his city, Tel Aviv, portrays one of the novel’s key concepts, i.e., finding refuge. The dictionary definition of the word “refuge” describes it as “a place to flee and escape from danger, [to] a safe structure. [...] a place of refuge.”⁴⁰ This definition reinforces the concept that refuge is an alternative, protected space replacing the previously abandoned space. Mordecai Manuel Noah’s desire to establish Ararat as a city of refuge for the Jewish People in the Diaspora in the year 1825 is the historical event that engendered the events in the novel. Manuel Noah, who anticipated the Holocaust of the Jews, sought to find a protected place that would replace anti-Semitic Europe. However, conversations with his hosts in the United States revealed to him that anti-Semitism was also found on the American continent and linked to a series of antagonisms that included both hatred of blacks and indigenous Native Americans.

In the second plot, which takes place in 1825, Little Dove is an American native whose area of habitation is included in Manuel Noah’s purchase. In this story, she becomes Lenox’s servant, and when Lenox (this time, a white Christian “master”) sees Little Dove carving out a canoe, he mocks her because he thinks she is not capable of finding shelter. As her patron, *he* is in effect responsible for her protection. Witnessing her relationship with nature and her general beliefs, which are quite different from those of Christianity,⁴¹ he relates to her both as his subordinate and an ignoramus, and hence his objectifying attitude toward her. His repeated attempts to sexually force himself upon her emerge from his perception of himself as master of the territory. His gestures toward her are equivalent to the violence directed at another namesake, this time the “child” Simon, a black boy who also becomes Lenox’s servant. This black “other,” who Lenox views as a dimwit, becomes a target of violence, and the child seeks solace from the suffering by wanting to take his own life. The subsequent solidarity that develops between Little Dove and the “child” Simon, somewhat analogous to the solidarity formed between Liam Emanuel

and Simon T. Lenox in the first story, enables them to survive in a world in which they are objects of ridicule and violence. This is demonstrated in Little Dove’s decision to teach the child reading and writing while she treats his wounds, and in the boy’s attempt to help defend her from Lenox by providing her with a weapon. In addition, they together adopt a custom of not assuming the often-derogatory terms used by white people and instead call each other by their real names.

A similar solidarity can also be found among the “others” who are classified under two categories of “otherness.” For example, Simon, the *Afro-American homosexual* in the third plot tries to save a presidential candidate who is also a *Jewish woman* in a 2001 science fiction account based on what would have happened if the Jewish state became an American island, that is, Isra Isle. The attempt by Simon, a black photographer, to rescue her is interpreted by the security guards as an attack on her and this provokes a violent response toward him.

All the “others” who are described as inhabiting the same foreign space in the three separate plots of the book seek support from each other and act as mutual saviors. But despite these occasional, successful efforts at solidarity, the novel arrives at one definite conclusion: There is no genuine refuge for the “other.” The inability to find a safe space is because the “other” is always deprived of the right to delineate the boundaries of his or her territory or space.

In the third plot of the novel, Simon, the black homosexual, takes photographs of paparazzi for a living. He expresses a wish to establish “an island of refuge for gays, an island for gypsies, an island for handicapped and mentally ill people, and an island for blacks.”⁴² These words remain only a vision for, in reality, these “others” are strangers in the “house” of the hegemonic empire and are subordinate to its authority without any chance of securing an autonomous space.⁴³ Mr. Lenox, in the second plot, tries to break down Little Dove’s door and rape her because he does not accept the boundaries she has drawn between them. In the same manner that whites deprived the natives and blacks of their lands, they also seek to deprive the “other” of his or her right to his or her own body and appropriate it for themselves. This is indication of the dehumanization process that members of the hegemony force upon the “others” and, from here on, the slippery slope to physical and sexual violence is inevitable.

A significant sign of how the “child” Simon and Little Dove have lost their humanity in the eyes of their “masters” is the deliberate neglect of their names. The “masters” simply call them “boy” or “girl.” Similarly, Mr. Lenox’s wife—who is unable to give him an heir—is also perceived as an “other” who does not fulfill her “purpose,” and hence Mr. Lenox is also violent toward her. In the same vein, he does not support women’s suffrage. The white woman who is merely a wife to the white master is not included in the privileged hegemony since she is regarded as inferior, just another subordinate. Although Mrs. Lenox is in fact fascinated by the deep relationship between Little Dove and nature, her husband’s threats and violence prevent her from straying from the Good Christian path and she chooses to ignore Little Dove.⁴⁴

Little Dove’s father refers to the territory (i.e., space) to which a person belongs as a sheath that cannot be shed. Yet, in this world conceived by Semel, the “other” is compelled to leave his or her living place if they wish to survive. At the same time, without this protective sheath or shell, he or she is more liable to be subject to violence. The historically-aware reader knows that, in reality, Mordecai Manuel Noah’s visions came true, since the Jews who did not leave Europe became victims of genocide. Native Americans in the United States were also plagued by violence and disease, as well as subject to religious persecution and forced conversion. In the case of the Jewish refuge, Semel hints at an analogy between the fictional “there” (Grand Island) and the actual “here” in the Land of Israel. The Biblical place was meant to be a safe haven and homeland for the Jews after the Holocaust yet it became a land of dispute between Palestinians and Jews. Similar to the historical mountain of Ararat that, according to Manuel Noah, was supposed to have been rebuilt on lands taken from indigenous peoples, Israel was also established on lands that were inhabited by Palestinians who became refugees and were forced to live elsewhere.

The circular structure of the novel (present-past-present) is not only a poetic technique of bridging the present with the past, but it also implies that the struggle for space/territory that reigns since the dawn of history will most likely accompany human existence no matter what direction it takes. Therefore, the definition of the concept of refuge must include a time component, for every refuge, according to the novel, *Isra Isle*, is temporary.⁴⁵ Hence, also the name of the novel, which

describes a utopia and at the same time rejects it by means of the Hebrew prefix “i.”⁴⁶ This is an indication that utopias are good ideas for playwrights such as Mordecai Manuel Noah and Theodor Herzl, but they do not stand the test of reality.

“Hat of Glass”⁴⁷—A Supervised Space

According to literary reviews, Semel’s inaugural book of stories, *Hat of Glass*, belongs to the narrative of second-generation Holocaust survivors, and is considered the first collection in which children of Holocaust survivors were given a chance to express themselves.⁴⁸ Respectively, Nurit Govrin notes two major themes that are prevalent throughout the book: “names” or “naming” as a theme—indicating the problematics inherent to the Jewish and Israeli identity—and “family secrets” that protagonists have to deal with, especially when trying to expose them. A review of the titles of several stories and the plots of others in the collection presents a third central motif—the uncontrolled movement from one space to another that is closely associated with the search for identity. The stories, “A Lady from Fayyum,” “Fonda—A Trip,” “Suitcases,” “So What Exactly is a Trip” and “A Journey to Two Berlins,” all indicate in their titles the spatial movement of their heroes, whether voluntarily or against their will.

The story, “Hat of Glass,” is a first-person testimony told by a woman Holocaust survivor. The opening statement, “This is not the whole truth,”⁴⁹ reinforces the retrospective viewpoint and the narrator’s feeling that despite the reappearance of the past in her present life, her Holocaust experiences can never be fully understood and a complete reconstruction of events is impossible. Therefore, the story only provides an account of the last few months of World War II when the narrator was interned in the Zittau labor camp in Germany. The readers do not witness the torments that the narrator suffered from the beginning of the war and the story is clearly not a systematic account of her life. The focus on the labor camp enables us to experience—side by side with the narrator—her life in supervised areas: her arrival in the crowded train car, fences encircling the camp, SS officers, prisoner uniforms, and a disorientation in the vein of “what new land of trickery have we arrived at?”⁵⁰ In other words, the woman finds herself in a strange place (or space), unknown and unidentified, which is an intentional part of the process of stripping the prisoners of

their identity. This is also reflected in the deprivation of the names of inmates and their transformation into mere numbers. In addition to the confined spatial dimension, there is also a highly-enforced time factor, which begins with a wake-up call at 4:30 AM. The prisoners’ time turns into a series of fixed stations and tasks, another sign proving how they are under total Nazi control.

When the narrator writes: “Who are you? Who are you? I don’t know. I don’t remember,”⁵¹ the reader already becomes acquainted with the implications of supervised space. In the labor camps, the narrator is confined to an unfamiliar space and takes on the role of a prisoner, fulfilling conditions that make her forget her selfness. The implicit indication is that the killing machine not only helped the Nazis eliminate Jews but the intentionally-created spatial conditions also expedited their “disappearance.” This is emphasized when the Russians arrive and liberate the camp. The protagonist’s name is then restored to the narrator but she feels estranged from it, and this estrangement is sustained because the reader is not exposed to her name during her later testimony. This shows that even after her “liberation,” the narrator is still not capable of coping with all those years when she was deprived of her humanity amid the Nazi violence.

In contrast to the loss of the narrator’s name, which reemphasizes her inability to break away from her dark past, the story of Clarissa—another Jewish woman in the camp who fed the narrator while she was sick and saved her life—is discussed at length. Clarissa’s special status is the result of an affair she conducted with one of the Nazi woman officers, and evidently, she exploited the Nazi officer’s love for her in order to help her fellow inmates. Clarissa’s care for her counterparts contrasts sharply with the way the Nazis treated her. Rumor had it that in the past Clarissa had been a “[war] front whore” brought to the combat zone to amuse the officers. In the labor camp, she purposely became the Nazi officer’s lover in order to help the women prisoners. She shared some blueberries that the Nazi officer gave her with her friends, which exemplifies the role she assumed to ease the suffering of the women prisoners.

From among the various and harsh conditions of mental, physical, and spatial oppression, Semel prefers to describe the sisterhood nature among camp inmates. Early feminist theory

extolled utopian visions of sisterhood that feminist pioneers felt would challenge sexist thinking patterns, on the basis of the notion that “sisterhood is power.”⁵² Indeed, the story describes a sisterhood that contributes to the inmates’ survival and their struggle with hostile forces. An example is when the camp is liberated by the Russians and Clarissa asks the narrator to report the woman Nazi officer who tries to escape her fate by pretending to be Jewish. In the end, however, the officer is turned in by another prisoner by the name of Janine, and the German officer is effectively cast out by the Jewish women who show solidarity with each other.

Consequently, the supervised space does not achieve its goal (in the eyes of the hegemony) since the women remain loyal to each other, and both their humanity and values are not forsaken. In addition, the boundary that the hegemony (the Nazis) had drawn between their own selves and the “others” (the Jews) becomes not only a repressive force in the form of the fenced-in camp, but also a liberating force. The Jewish women “others” in the story refuse to accept the Nazi officer and, instead, expel her from their space. Reporting her attempt to hide among them leads to her murder by the Russians, and with this act they reaffirm their adherence to the hegemony’s spatial separation that delineates an absolute dichotomy between “us” (the Nazis) and “them” (the Jews).

After the war, the protagonist returns to her home in Europe, but later on she immigrates to Israel and settles in Tel Aviv. The spatial movement does not abate even when she is older because she returns with her granddaughter to her old house in Europe from which she was brutally evacuated.

Her “past” life, which included a husband and a fetus aborted during the war, takes a turn when she embarks on a “new” life in Israel as the wife of a second husband, and as a mother and grandmother. However, the end of the story in which she declares, “I thank the sun and the new light, but my sorrow and sufferings will rest on the heads of the children like a glass hat,”⁵³ reveals that her past full of sorrow and torment is not forgotten. It is present and felt even when it is not visible; however, as she indicates, this past is not entirely without sun and light. The story of her endurance in the camp and her conscious preoccupation with Clarissa’s image in the present show how light can also be found in evil, for, although the closed and oppressive space separated the

“others” from the hegemony, at the same time, it helped build up and strengthen the connection and a sense of mutual responsibility among the “others.” The “new sun,” a metaphor for the notion of Zionism that sought to purge the survivors of their past, interplays with the illuminated memory that is at the center of the story—a living, vivid memory that continues to persist despite all the years that have passed.

Clarissa’s actions in the camp, which the narrator repeats in her mind’s eye, underscore the words of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who indicated the temporality of the concept of “man”⁵⁴ but offered a way to restore humanity to the world, i.e., by way of *responsibility*. Levinas maintained that all people were responsible for the “other,” for everything that is not theirs or does not even concern them. An individual’s responsibility for the “other” should exist without expectation of reciprocity and, hence, “I carry the ‘other’ and I am responsible for him.”⁵⁵ According to Levinas, “the humaneness of man, the subjectivity, are responsibility toward others,”⁵⁶ hence, man consists of responsibility.⁵⁷ While Levinas described the concept of the hegemony’s responsibility toward the “others,” then, in the “Hat of Glass,” the concept is in fact adopted by the “others” whose mutual responsibility makes their survival possible. This, as noted above, is in view of the hegemony’s decision not only to abandon its responsibility toward the “others,” but even more essentially—in their act to eliminate them.

“Private Holocaust”⁵⁸—From Periphery to Urban Space

This is a story about the identity crisis of a young Israeli woman whose mother is a Holocaust survivor. The mother’s first two children perished during the great catastrophe in her first attempt to raise a family in Europe. The daughter’s story is related using various poetic means to portray a spatial conflict. “Private Holocaust” (from the *Hat of Glass* collection of stories) opens with the symbolic statement: “They told her: London is not a city for you. Go back home.”⁵⁹ “They” are cautioning Dafna Berkovitz, the protagonist, who, in the beginning of the story, lives in London trying to fulfill her dream of becoming a theater actor. Originally from a kibbutz, Dafna changes her name to Daphne Randy and lives in London for two years, waiting for the opportunity to finally chance upon a long-awaited and coveted role. The transition from the kibbutz, that bastion of

Israeliness which reveres the idea of a cooperative community, to London, the great and alienating metropolis, is perceived by the young hopeful as a compound opportunity to escape her past, whether this meant withering in the shadow of her Holocaust survivor mother’s stories, or suffering from the stifling cooperative existence on the kibbutz. Looking back on kibbutz life, Dafna reconstructs her failed effort to adopt a cat, since it was prohibited to own private property in the collective. Then she recalls the intense shame she felt when her parents divorced yet remained on the kibbutz, which was made even worse since “no privacy” is the norm and the public is not spared a single detail of the individual’s story.

Dafna’s mother, who would sometimes lapse into Polish instead of the more commonly spoken Hebrew, is regarded in the kibbutz as somewhat of an oddity. The Zionist ethos, which held that Holocaust survivors should forget their past and begin a new life, and whose proponents “already urged her to forget, to promptly engage in making child replicas,”⁶⁰ did not quite resonate in her mother’s heart. Although her mother did in fact marry after the Holocaust and gave birth to a daughter, she chose to detach herself from the surrounding environment, which was even more pronounced due to the spatial closeness she imposed upon herself. She lived an isolated life in her room, baking cakes for festive kibbutz occasions.

Dafna certainly feels like a “child replica” and thus seeks an autonomous identity which she believes she will be able to realize far from the kibbutz. She also believes that this is more likely to take place in a foreign city and on the condition that she adopt a new name. At the beginning of the story, she maintains that “you can only discover yourself in a foreign city. A great artist can only flourish... [in the city] without suffocating.”⁶¹ Indeed, this assertion, which is stated after the course of events, to a certain degree, materializes. In the foreign city, Dafna comes to terms with the roots she tried to leave behind and discovers herself in the thick of a traumatic incident, specifically, the “private Holocaust” she is subjected to by chance encounter. She is kidnapped by a young jewelry thief and experiences a terrifying vulnerability on every inch of her body in the presence of masculine violence and, ultimately, she relinquishes her dream. After receiving a telegram from her father informing her of her mother’s illness, she returns to Israel,

although at first, she suspects it is a plot cooked up by her mother to get her to come back. But, after going through the violent kidnapping and attempted rape, she draws an imaginative, analogous line between her mother’s experience in the Holocaust and the difficult experience she went through, and comes to a decision that exonerates her mother: “You are free of all blame.”⁶²

Following the violent act, Dafna returns home and resolves the identity crisis that had plagued her. The structure that Semel chose, i.e., of kidnapping-rape-salvation, is a mythical pattern that can be traced, among other parallels, to Homeric’s hymn to Demeter.⁶³ This play describes Persephone’s abduction by Hades to the underworld, the rape by Hades, and the ensuing rage of her mother, Demeter, goddess of the harvest. Demeter’s emotions lead to a significant drought and this forces the gods to change the decree and restore the daughter to her mother for two-thirds of each year.

Vered Lev-Kenaan,⁶⁴ who studied the abduction and rape of Persephone, notes that in Greek mythology rape has an ambivalent meaning with respect to the victim. Namely, it has both a death aspect but also an enlivening aspect: “On one hand, the rape is perceived as a traumatic incident that cuts short the woman’s life as a virgin, but, on the other hand, it indicates the adult and mature appearance of the maiden in the public space.”⁶⁵ This mythological equation can also be found in Semel’s story, “Private Holocaust.” The kidnapping and attempted rape are traumatic and violent events that place Dafna in grave danger, but, at the same time, they carry the potential to resolve Dafna’s identity crisis and bring her back home. She forgives her mother, drawing a full parallel between the threat she encountered and the threat her mother experienced at the hands of the Nazis, and then goes back to the home from where she originally fled. She realizes that “the light will never rise”⁶⁶ in the foreign city, and in spite of her earlier thoughts and aspirations, she will not be able to fulfill her professional identity abroad. London, for her, is indeed a “city of refuge,”⁶⁷ but this refuge is only temporary. With the acknowledgement of her mother’s life story, Dafna no longer needs to flee and seek the adoration of the theater audience as a substitute for her mother’s love, so she puts on the sweater her mother knitted for her and flies back to Israel. The original desire to become an antithesis to her mother, who is profoundly withdrawn into her own

soul and space, is transformed into identification and empathy. Also similar to the story of Persephone, Dafna’s retreat to her roots stems from her mother’s summoning cry. Demeter moved heaven and earth to retrieve her daughter who was taken from her, while Dafna’s mother’s illness brings her back to her mother’s side. In both stories, the daughter suffers from a violent experience that triggers a process of realization and the formation of an independent identity, yet at the same time the new feminine autonomy encourages a sober and mature return to the rooted-maternal space.

A rigorous study of the male oppression of women reveals another aspect embedded in the story. Anthropologist Kathleen Gough⁶⁸ lists some of the elements of oppression that are common in the male abuse of power against women. For example, in the abuse of female sexuality, either the woman is deprived of sexuality, or the man sexually forces himself upon her. Additional elements are: the control and exploitation of women labor and output; control over their children or even removal of children from maternal custody; using women as objects in transactions conducted among men; the suppression of female creativity; and the denial of female access to broad areas of knowledge as well as the imposition of physical restrictions on women, including their freedom of movement.⁶⁹ In view of the above, the story’s setting regarding the physical threat that prevents freedom of movement (the abduction of Dafna and her captivity in a hut) together with the threat of sexual coercion (the attempted rape that fails due to the kidnapper’s impotence), lead Dafna to return to the rooted space she originally left. The emergent picture is that the violent act essentially achieved its goal because it provoked Dafna to return to Israel. She does not even attend a keenly anticipated London audition, which was also a chance to fulfill the professional identity she fought for so hard and so long. In fact, identity was the reason why she chose to leave the kibbutz peripheral space and set out for the big city in the first place. Thus, an additional analogy is created between daughter and mother, for, both ultimately chose spatial enclosure in order to survive.⁷⁰ The mother secludes herself in her room and kitchen and in this way defies kibbutz collectivism, the melting pot ethos and the loss of privacy. The daughter, on the other hand, leaves alienating London where she had sex with men she met at random and returns to the kibbutz—the closed society where the lover of her youth still lives but has long ago married.

In sum, the story features an analogous pattern of trauma shared by both mother and daughter—the mother’s experience in the Holocaust and the daughter’s abduction and attempted rape—and ends in a spatial analogy between the two. Both “sentence” themselves to a conscious spatial confinement after violent actions they experienced, and their mobility in this final space is constrained. The mother who hems herself in her house and draws a boundary between her and the hegemony, and the daughter who returns to Israel despite her understanding that she will no longer tread the boards of kibbutz theater stages, are both an example of the “success” of male violence in removing women from the public sphere and preventing them from developing counter-stereotypical identities (such as, an employed identity⁷¹). Yet, Dafna’s thoughts on the plane taking her home are ambivalent: “Will again not let go. One must hold on to the belt with all one’s strength.”⁷² On one hand, she will not *let go* of her mother and her roots, and she will not *let go* of the dream of professional fulfillment (not letting go has two meanings). But the ambivalence is listed in the fact that she *did* withdraw from London and by giving up the dream and leaving the megalopolis, this action is standing testimony to the success of the violent act since Dafna is returning in order to nurture her mother. Indeed, she is going back to the peripheral space which does not allow her to realize her professional aspirations. The violence she went through resolves the crisis of her personal identity, yet it also prevents her from developing other identities which she can fulfill only in a non-peripheral space.

Space-Off: The Price of Salvation in the Novel, *And the Rat Laughed*⁷³

As noted above, a space-off (or third space) makes it feasible to perform actions that the hegemony usually does not allow.⁷⁴ The evolvment of particular kinds of space that are conducive to opposing or challenging the hegemony is a result of their geographic location—they are far from the center of control and therefore enable a “breached” or open space type and the subsequent development of new forms. The rural setting of this story in Poland is a space-off that fills the function of this type of site in the novel, *And the Rat Laughed*. By virtue of this space, the rescue of a five-year-old girl from the clutches of the Nazi extermination machine is made possible.⁷⁵ The

Polish village is not completely isolated because the girl, who is hidden by a peasant couple in a potato pit for a sum of money, can still hear the droning of WWII planes circling in the sky.

Ostensibly, the actions of the peasant couple, who are willing to hide the Jewish girl and thus save her from an almost certain death, seem to be a subversive action against the (Nazi) hegemony which will place them in grave danger. However, the rescue of the child from one perpetrator (the Nazi enemy) involves the child becoming the victim of sexual abuse committed by another perpetrator—the peasants’ son.

Just as the unsupervised space makes it possible for the peasant couple to hide away a Jewish girl during the Holocaust, the exact same space gives their son free rein to rape the child in a dark pit, with no one to halt the abuse, and without the son having to pay for his actions. Even after the girl is released and assigned to the custody of a priest who is aware of the boy’s actions, the perpetrator gets off scot-free. He does not confess to his actions, he is not brought to trial nor confronted with his crime, and simply goes on with his life. The victim, on the other hand, who has been “saved,” lives for the remainder of her life in the shadow of the emotional quagmire of threat and abuse that was forced upon her. Thus, a hypothetical utopia is achieved that produces a “third space” where the individual may gain a degree of autonomy, but in this case, it runs exactly contrary to the ideal vision that allows life to be lived free of oppression. “The third space,” although being distant from the hegemonic center, still includes remnants of hegemonic patterns and these are enough to reproduce the binary system of forces between man and woman, between torturer and victim.

In her later testimony, the protagonist states: “I was in the darkness. A sludge of time. I couldn’t tell when it started or when it ended.”⁷⁶ With these words she challenges both the concept of space as well as the concept of time, and in the spatial context she creates an “a-space.”⁷⁷ The girl who was stuck in the pit and underwent severe sexual abuse “imports” the notion of the “other planet” described by author and Holocaust survivor, Ka-Tsetnik,⁷⁸ since her experiences do not seem to her part of the real world. The girl who was born in a “big city” in Europe⁷⁹ maintains a dichotomous distinction between the human space—her pre-war childhood and life with her

parents—and the animal space where she lives in a hole swarming with creatures and parasites during the WWII era. The conceptualization of an “a-space” is an attempt to push away the dark period and not let it take hold of her. However, in the same way that the repressed story later surfaces again and again in her consciousness, and most likely will be ever-present in her life, her attempt to define an “a-space” also fails, and she returns to the sounds she heard in the village that proved she was in a human space. Even the peasants’ arguments she hears from her hiding place evoke analogies of the quiet arguments her parents conducted among themselves. Therefore, we understand that the attempt to wipe out that period in her life has failed and instead she remembers “every day, hour after hour, her mother turning around, even now, when she is forty years older than her [mother].”⁸⁰

When recalling the peasant woman who gave her shelter, the survivor remembers the words the woman told her before she was extracted from the pit: “You Jews take up all the places in heaven. Because of you we’ll all have to go to hell.”⁸¹ While mass extermination is related to the Nazi desire to “purify” the *area* of Jews (*judenrein*), Semel demonstrates here the spatial analogy between the different approaches as well as the hatred of Jews, for the peasant woman quotes deep-seated anti-Semitic idioms in the spirit of Catholicism that refer to the degree of available space in paradise. In this way, the point is again accentuated how the “other” is viewed as undesirable in the spatial region, and from here it is only a short step to extermination or collaboration with the exterminators.

Orly Lubin proposes that the body can be a metaphoric representation of nationalism,⁸² and this conceptualization makes it possible to explain the choices made by the Nazis and their collaborators in regard to the punishment of the Jews. The Nazis strove to completely remove the Jewish entity (or “body”) by means of their annihilation. Lubin stresses that there is a “hierarchy of causing harm and being harmed,”⁸³ which indicates *who* and *what* is part and not part of the “body.” The application of her theory to the scenario described in the novel shows that through the means of violence the “us” versus “them” are both defined; in this case, the Christians versus the Jews. Accordingly, the novel shows how the same violence that represents a superiority of the

Nazis and the Poles (who abuse and are inhuman toward the girl although they provide shelter for her) is violence for the sake of violence. Its purpose is to eradicate the “other” while completely eliminating his or her humanity. Hence, Stephan, the peasant’s son, utters these words to the girl while he rapes her: “A Jewish hole. That’s what you are.”⁸⁴ The different ideologies serve only as a backdrop for the main issue—the use of violence against Jews.

Even when Priest Stanislaw grants the girl refuge in the church and offers his bed to her, she chooses to reside in an alcove on the chamber floor, which she digs in the ground. The hooded priest who heals her wounds and hides her is not able to help the little girl overcome her longing to be “part of the ground.” The strong pull of the earth has several meanings. It comes from the habit of being in the potato pit for a year, and her internalization of the fact of her marginal place. Her peripheral location is expressed in the song, “Up-Down”⁸⁵ where it is written as follows:

Up
Peasants
Higher up
Birds
Highest up
Parents

Down
Jews
Further down
Children
Furthest down
Children
Of the Jews

Clearly, the decision of the six-year-old girl to adhere close to the ground demonstrates the success of the ideologies of deprivation. These were expressed by the peasant woman who earlier preached to the girl about her inferiority, and by her son, Stephan, who, while abusing the girl, would repeatedly stress her subordination and objectify her, ingraining in her the feeling of marginality, and hence her attachment to the space below. As the song describes so well, this space

was usually reserved for the children of the Jews, a people that was abominated and persecuted during this period.

Furthermore, clinging to the ground is associated with the death wish, which, years later, is portrayed during the funeral of the (grown) girl’s husband, as she lingers next to the grave opening until the moment when her granddaughter’s father finally moves her away. On another level, there is longing for the land or earth that is antithetic to any spirituality associated with the heavens above. More aptly, it corresponds with her feeling that, “Mother in heaven does not know what is being done to girls under the ground.”⁸⁶ Even the priest, who writes in his diary irreverent thoughts about God, goes so far as to disbelieve in His existence in view of the severe abuse the girl has undergone. Consequently, in the absence of a divine Providence, and in a world where humans have turned into animals, refuge lies in the earth. It may in fact be rife with animals such as rodents and other vermin, but rats apparently have less potential for inflicting harm than humans.

During the Holocaust of her people, the girl lived in a “small place. There are many places like this one. No one will recognize its name. No one will remember. And life moves smoothly along its tracks as if the war was not taking place at all.”⁸⁷ In the end, the girl is saved from execution. The village granted her two hiding places—the pit where she was subject to emotional and sexual abuse, and the chamber in the church where the priest took care of her. The space-offs created in the novel contain different and contrasting life patterns—violent destruction vis-à-vis human salvation. These are embedded in the very essence of the girl who eventually becomes a grandmother in Tel Aviv and tells her granddaughter her story only with the aid of a secret language. The protagonist’s disappointment from the various spaces—the ones where she had lived in the past, and the current space that provokes conflicts with her daughter, generates a longing for an alternative space. She hastens to take computer courses and hopes to find her lost parents on the Internet where there are no spatial boundaries.

The little girl’s survival is therefore made possible by her concealment in a pit and by living in the back chamber of the church—hidden spaces that are ascribed to the interior, the inside. Residing in a closed space is supposed to protect the girl, first, from the Nazis who are searching

for Jews (the pit), and later on, from village informers as well as soldiers who are looking for Jews (the church). The interior enables her survival, but also prevents her from living a real life, getting to know other children, and so on. The priest, who is in awe of all this, takes her to the top of the bell tower so that for a moment she can be the observer and not the observed, and in this way, perhaps prevent further harm to her. An excellent, sharply contrasting analogy is the grand wedding planned for the peasant’s son, Stephan, and his free movement in various spaces, as well as the Christian rites, rituals and sermons taking place outside the peasants’ house. While the girl victim is condemned to live in hidden away marginal spaces—in fact, this is the guarantee for letting her live, then, the perpetrator has absolute control of the space around him and does not need to restrict his movements.

The priest, who was born after his own mother was raped, is well aware of the cycle of female victimization. His mother was banished in disgrace because she was accused of committing the sin of intercourse. As a result, he was raised by his grandmother and destined from birth to priesthood, thus deprived of the possibility of realizing his sexuality and becoming a parent. The life of a clergyperson was meant to atone for the family sin (that was of course *not* committed), and Priest Stanislaw had to sacrifice his dream of having children. Just like the priest, the girl who is punished for her Jewishness must sacrifice her childhood, and instead move from one hiding place to another.

The peripheral space, in this case, then, is a space in which the “other” finds partial or limited protection from the hegemony but, at the same time, it is still a space imposed upon the individual. It is the hegemony that corrals the “other” (consciously or unconsciously) into closed spatial niches, thus restricting the victim’s existence in space while establishing its power. The priest, who feels disgust toward the peasant’s son/rapist, is required to perform the wedding ceremony despite his strong feelings of repugnance. Although Stanislaw in fact lives in the isolated church, he is still subordinate to the hegemony, that is, the wealthy farmers, and his subversive activities are carried out in secret. As a little boy, Stanislaw was afraid of the whispering of other children and now as an adult he is afraid of the people of his village and their power. The priest

knows that his sermons are futile and are just an external pretense, for, the village people will remain silent in regard to the Holocaust and continue to engage in the “public dealings of marital arrangements.”⁸⁸ So, the priest ultimately declares his conclusion to the girl: “The world is over there and we are here.”⁸⁹

Another spatial dimension that is thematic throughout the novel is the *symbolic* aspect. When the protagonist tells her granddaughter about the story of her escape, she uses indirect descriptions in order not to traumatize the girl. She converts her personal story into a type of “fable,” specifically, an “afterword” to the creation of the world involving a rat who asked God for the ability to laugh. One of the rat’s descendants is fortunate enough to laugh just once when it hears the girl’s words as she climbs out of the potato pit. Accordingly, the girl thinks the rat is the happiest of all creatures, but the rat’s laughter leads to an earthquake. This “fable” blurs the distinctions between space above and space below and in effect makes a dialogue between God and rat feasible. The spatial interface is related to the interaction between human culture and animal culture because the rat talks with God, but the rodent also understands what the girl is saying. This symbolic fable also indicates a general greater loss of boundaries, because during the time of World War II humans indeed became animals (i.e., the peasant’s son/rapist, and his parents, who remain silent in the presence of these terrible acts of violence), whereas the animal seeks to acquire a human trait. The reiteration of the opening verse of the Book of Genesis, “darkness on the face of the abyss,”⁹⁰ which describes the pit where the girl was concealed, gives strong symbolic prominence to her feeling that the world at that specific time ceased to exist—similar to the pre-creation world. If the creation of the world engendered spatial order, such as the separation between the heavens above and the earth below, then, World War II marked the end of the creation for the survivor and a return to the old order—an order that is disorder, a chaos. In a reality where a peasant couple receives money for keeping a five-year-old girl in their custody, and then asks for more money to hand her over to a third party, in a reality where this little girl is subject to ongoing sexual abuse for a whole year—the survivor, just like the religious cleric, both have doubts about the world being a Divine creation, and therefore the priest says to the Almighty: “You are my Father and I am not your son.”⁹¹

The Woman’s Spatial Journey: *Australian Wedding*⁹²

In cultural terms, the concept of the “spatial journey” has predominantly been a male prerogative. This tendency is a result of the subordination of women to the private sphere and the construction of the public sphere as a male dominion. Hannah Naveh⁹³ draws attention to the gender bias implicit in many travel stories, and finds it to be rooted in the woman’s place of dwelling, i.e., the home. Departure from home, the domestic territory that is considered a safe haven, runs contrary to the stereotype of women, since the latter are not supposed to roam freely in public. The public sphere is regarded as masculine territory, and therefore the movement of women “outside” is considered an “invitation” to violence and harm. Hence, patriarchy-based appellations are given to the various spaces covered in these journeys, such as, “virgin land,” and “black continents that must be known or possessed.”⁹⁴ As noted previously, spatial restriction leads to a limited conception of the feminine identity; it is narrowly viewed as a *monolithic* identity.⁹⁵ This serves the androcentric assumption that views women as a dominated class which requires male protection, especially when members of this class leave the confines of the private sphere.

This perception is embedded in many myths, such as the *Odyssey*, which portrays a man’s treacherous return voyage to his home and waiting wife, based on the model of the “waiting woman” or “a woman waiting.”⁹⁶ Hebrew-language feminine literature *subverts* this thematic model and presents female spatial journeys that are initiated and carried out by a woman; she is no longer simply an adjunct to the man on his travels or waiting for his return. The turning point in the perception of the public sphere as a masculine niche can be found in the pioneering novel written by Hebrew author Leah Goldberg, *Letters from an Imaginary Journey*,⁹⁷ which portrays the journey of a female protagonist (Ruth) and her effort to overcome her heartbreak. Goldberg engages in a dialogue with the male journey novel, and constructs an epistolary novel which is in effect Ruth’s spiritual journey. If a woman cannot make a spatial journey, then she travels along the paths of her soul, for one’s soul can easily cross the hurdles of space. The space conceived by Goldberg allows us to view a mixture between inside (the spirit, the soul) and outside (voyage),

between imagination and reality. In this way, she prevails over both spatial restrictions imposed on women as well as the generic dichotomy between autobiography and fiction.

The autobiographical Semel novel, *Australian Wedding*, is part of the trend that breaks down the conditions establishing that “travels” are a matter left to men, although the motivating agent behind her journey is family. The reason for Nava Semel’s trip to Australia is to visit her eldest son, Iyar. Just as Virginia Woolf argued that the household can also include a woman’s study room, Semel similarly shows that the family does not need to function as a space-limiting factor, but rather may contribute to a woman’s spatial movement. At the beginning of her trip, she states: “I’m a displaced traveler, withered,”⁹⁸ and then she embarks on what turns out to be a shaky journey, but ultimately, she succeeds in reaching the finishing line. Post-voyage, she is empowered with regard to two aspects of her identity: Her relationship with her son—with whom she stayed in Australia—is bolstered, and she makes significant progress with the compilation of materials for her book that coalesces during her trip.

As a peripheral yet huge continent inhabited in many remote places, and where nature is dominant because of the sparse population, Australia exposes Semel not only to new spaces but also to alternative modes of subsistence in comparison to her earlier experience. She is confronted with the contrast between the space left behind (Israel) and that of Australia (specifically, Lismore), which is intensified by her impressions regarding the centrality of nature and the attempt to prevail over the Western “white man” culture in the Great Southern Land. However, this contrast shifts to an analogy in the attitude toward the “other” and just like in the novel, *Isra Isle*, where Semel examined the oppression of Native Americans, she lingers at the Australian wedding in order to talk about the oppression of the Aborigines in Australia. The recent war against the “other” that spread across the Australian continent corresponds with the war that Israelis in Australia are afraid of, which is portrayed as a direct sequel of the Second Lebanon War. The hegemonic culture and the struggle for territory thus characterizes the Australian outback area just like the Israeli space. But the young Israelis who seek refuge in Australia in fact ignore the legacy of oppression that marks the continent, just as the local woman, Jasmine, explains:

We Australians are self-absorbed. We have an island mentality. We are a people that do not understand that things continue to happen in the rest of the world around us; we deny and ignore it, we live our life without taking responsibility for what’s going on in the world, except perhaps for the ecological issue and concern for the fate of the Earth.⁹⁹

The great Australian expanse seems to enable the existence of the white “other” and proof is the cult of the women- “fairies” who live in a feminine-autonomous space, and similarly, there are also concentrations of single mothers and lesbians. But, at the same time, the space also conceals within it racism, the oppression of indigenous peoples, the expropriation of their children in order to transform them into “civilized human beings,” ethnocentrism, and more. These aspects show how, during her journey, Semel is in fact exposed to different “life forms” other than herself, but the longer she continues on her journey, the more she confirms her prior personal and spatial identities. These do not prevent her from accepting the “other” and from understanding her son’s choices, but her earlier assertion that her son is now the “adult who shows the way”¹⁰⁰ is only partially realized.

Semel’s son shows her his customs and beliefs, some of which (such as living with a non-Jewish spouse) go against the values on which he was raised. Semel tries to set aside the parent-child hierarchy and attempts to avoid being judgmental, even when she has doubts about the quest presented to her and the degree of its spirituality. However, when she measures her professional identity as a writer up against the Australian feminist, Reisha—who is forced to disguise herself as a man so as to make her unfiltered voice heard—Semel implicitly criticizes the male dominance felt even in the Australian periphery, which was supposed to liberate its residents from the onus of the “white man” and his customs. This periphery makes it possible for women to make their unfettered voices heard only in two ways: by living in a feminine space that does not include men, or by pretending that they are men. Semel, a writer who lives in the Tel Aviv metropolis, weighs this against her own reality and her use of both fictional and autobiographical genres, and finds that she is capable of in fact shaking off the fictional disguise in order to make her unfiltered voice heard—an inverse process to that which is attributed to Reisha.

Semel uses her travel diary in order to draw a comparison between spatial travels and the “journey of writing.” This *Ars Poetica* aspect emphasizes the fact that the author realizes there is a Gordian knot between space and creativity, for, while her works indeed move from space to space, the “boidem,”¹⁰¹ in her words, is a cultural baggage she must carry wherever she goes—the Jewish culture in its various incarnations. Similar to the way Semel demonstrated in the novel, *Isra Isle*, how the longing for shelter remains unfulfilled, in this novel, *Australian Wedding*, it is evident that spatial flight leaves an identity void and Semel’s study of Israelis in Australia finds it to be a phenomenon that does not in fact fulfill its goal of detachment (from a place or time). The concern for Israel and the fear of another war, the quick response to the call for recruitment if war should break out, listening to Israeli radio, the connection to the Hebrew language, and her speculation whether the relationship between her son and his partner will succeed despite the cultural obstacles—all these indicate the impossibility, as she sees it, of such a sharp spatial transition from Israel to Australia.¹⁰²

The journey to Australia is not described as a story of initiation, for, as Nitza Ben-Dov¹⁰³ points out, the female initiation story does not indicate a delimited passage in time, akin to the male initiation story, but rather includes the entire gamut of the woman’s experiences and trials from her childhood to the end of her life.¹⁰⁴ Throughout the novel Semel returns to the sources that influenced her, among them, her family and Jewish culture together with key formative biographical events. It is in fact *the foreign space* that brings back memories and stresses her cultural roots and deep connection to Israel. The physical voyage allows her to reconnect with major turning points in her life, and her travel experiences confirm her life, beliefs and culture. Her assertion, “It is not certain that a dove and a raven can arrive at a Hollywood-type happy ending” (p. 76), which is said of her son and his partner, and also foresees their separation, is interpreted as a motion of no-confidence in the ability to live in a foreign space. The author, who “is bogged down by mental fetters” (p. 100) to the Israeli space, finds that the foreign space also conceals stories of oppression and stratification. Therefore, there is no spatial hierarchy between “there” and “here,” for, the beginning of the settlement of Australia by exiled prisoners is also a “founding legend” which involves spatial violence.

In the main Semel narrative of “the story of her travels,” Hannah Naveh (2002, pp. 228-250) discerns an additional sub-narrative, that of “the retrieval of the lost son.” Indeed, the purpose of the journey is also to bring home the wayward son. The son’s return is meant to express a renewed integration of the family, which includes reconciliation and confirmation of family values—even if the son does not live in the family home.¹⁰⁵ However, Semel’s journey as a mother who endeavors to bring her son home ends on an ambivalent note. Consoled by the fact that his mother has witnessed his lifestyle and that her journey has essentially confirmed and respected his choices, the son does in fact return to Israel, however, his next journey has already begun to take shape, and apparently will compel his mother to set out once again on a renewed episode of travels.

Summary

Most plots in Israeli literature take place within the borders of this country. Author Nava Semel chooses to track down her protagonists in an assortment of spaces. However, aside from the Israeli space, there are other spaces—some are global, such as, the United States, Europe, and Australia, and some are surrealistic spaces. Over the course of the travels of her protagonists, the reader is introduced to “others,” who range from Jewish Holocaust victims to women, blacks, LGBTs and children. These groups are often considered “others” in practically every society they live in.

The connection between “others” and *space* stems from their longing for the space to be their own, and in this way, they might turn from strangers into homeowners, from voiceless individuals into persons with rights. Their yearning takes on various forms and, accordingly, Semel follows in the footsteps of her protagonists, showing how these “others” manage in the world in which they are peripheral characters. On one hand, the “other” eventually agrees on a certain setting and pays deference to those who exclude him or her, while on the other, he or she in fact protests and attempts to change his or her life reality.

In Nava Semel’s prose, oppression is oppression. She draws parallel lines between anti-Semitism, chauvinism, Eurocentrism and homophobia. The historical line that stretches throughout her stories reveals a disturbing picture in which the hatred of the “other” peregrinates from one time to another, from place to place, and still, at every turn, there is no savior.

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Footnotes:

¹ Woolf (1989) [1929].

² Ibid.

³ According to the Howell (1993) typology.

⁴ Space or spatiality or spatial attributes.

⁵ Blumen (2005).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bhabha (1997).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sibley (1995), pp. 3-14.

¹⁰ Blumen (2005).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sibley (1995), pp. 32-48.

¹³ de Lauretis (1987). pp. 25-26.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Pile (1994).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ According to Shadmi (2007), pp. 26-30, radical feminism consists of five elements: vision, a personal element, a feminine element, a political element and the interconnectedness element. The *vision* that guides radical feminism is that of a different future, a different and better world. Radical politics seeks to bridge the gap between the now—the reality—and the radical feminist vision. In other words, it seeks to instigate social change in the direction of a new

actuality that includes alternative institutions which will replace the existing ones and the current rules and arrangements. The *personal element* indicates the obligation to implement radical feminist ideas in the daily lives of women, so that the exposé emphasis will not only be on mechanisms of male domination but that new and alternative interactions will be conducted in the personal lives of each woman. The *feminine element* stems from the radical feminist belief in the uniqueness of women and from its acknowledgment of feminine pride that derives from feminine experience instead of biological variance. This component does not promote the notion that women are necessarily better than men or similar to each other, but rather underscores the contribution of women to the world, their point of view, and acknowledges both similarity and distinctions among women. The *political component* of radical feminism relates to the connection between the personal and the political, between what takes place in the woman’s own world and that of the structure of patriarchal control in society. These gaps necessitate engagement in a political struggle in order to dissolve the male system of domination. The *interconnection* component puts emphasis on the connection among all forms of oppression and promotes the view that all forms—gender, class, ethnic, racist, nationalist, and other—are interrelated. They build, reinforce and sustain each other, and only the removal of all mechanisms of oppression and power relations will lead to the true liberation of women and the liberation of other deprived groups. The acknowledgment of the interconnections among the various forms of oppression stresses that the patriarchal system of control, which is at the center of the feminist debate, is the source and basis for other systems of oppression.

¹⁹ Semel was the first Israeli fiction writer to engage with the complex issue of the effect of the Holocaust on survivors’ children, a thematic choice that made her a pioneering female author in this field.

²⁰ For the problematics involved in the definition of the intended readers of Semel’s prose, see also Besser (1994) Or as Esther Fuch [1987, p. 90] describes in relation to feminine Israeli authors who are presented as “others:” “False categorization—or non-categorization, for that matter—has traditionally been frequent rationalization for excluding women’s work from the canon.

²¹ Semel (2005).

²² de Beauvoir (2009) [1949].

²³ Ibid., p. 197.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 214.

²⁵ Shenhar (2008).

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Sibley (1995), p. 26.

²⁹ Bhabha (1994).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ These circumstances are intricately presented in *three* different yet interlinked stories in three parts of the overall novel whose various protagonists have the same or similar names.

³² Semel (2005), pp. 91-92.

³³ Or “Toibeleh,” depending on the particular Yiddish pronunciation.

³⁴ Semel (2005), p. 120.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁶ Words uttered by Lenox, *ibid.*, p. 121.

³⁷ The “Galuti” Jew in Hebrew means a Jew from the Diaspora but indicates chiefly the Jewish ghetto, Old Country or Eastern European Jewish mentality.

³⁸ Semel (2005), p. 104.

³⁹ For elaboration on Mordecai Manuel Noah’s vision to gather the Jews of the world together in the country of Ararat on a plot of land he bought in the United States, see: Lori (2005).; Perry (2008).

⁴⁰ Even-Shoshan (2007).

⁴¹ Lenox, a Christian and earlier resident, was included in Noah’s purchase of the land.

⁴² Semel (2005), p. 230.

⁴³ According to Goldschmid (2005), Semel makes a connection between types of marginality by highlighting the persecution component. This component is albeit customarily associated with the Jewish identity, but at the same time it is portrayed by the novel as a characteristic that is not unique to the Jews, and in fact the Indians are in many aspects a reflection of the Jews. Mordecai Manuel Noah’s belief that American Indians are descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel enables the proposal of a symbiosis between the two groups, which undermines the belief in pure, isolated identities in favor of fluid and hybrid identities.

⁴⁴ In her works, Semel tends to exhibit the “interconnection element” when presenting different populations that suffer from oppression. See footnote 18 for the explanation of this element.

⁴⁵ This type of circular poetics is associated with the American writer and Nobel laureate, Toni Morrison (born 1931). This style of writing already became apparent in the first novel she published, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Both Morrison and Semel employ the circular pattern in order to demonstrate the closed vicious cycle of the oppression of minorities. In this manner, they demonstrate how a population that has experienced oppression in the past, even if it has found refuge or even emancipation, is still forced to deal with the implications of the identity of oppression.

⁴⁶ The prefix “i” (pronounced “ee”) in Hebrew often indicates the opposite, in this case, a literal translation of the Hebrew name of the novel (*I-Israel*) would be *Un-Israel* or *Un-Utopia* or *Dystopia*. At the same time, the word “i” in Hebrew also means “island.”

⁴⁷ This story is from the following collection: Nava Semel (1998, new edition) [1985, original publication]. *Hat of Glass*.

⁴⁸ Govrin (1998).

⁴⁹ Semel (1998), “Hat of Glass,” p. 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵² hooks (2000), pp. 13-17 [bell hooks writes her name in lower case as a form of protest and to distinguish herself from her namesake great-grandmother].

⁵³ Semel (1998), “Hat of Glass,” p. 36.

⁵⁴ Levinas (2004) [2000], p. 96.

⁵⁵ Levinas (1995) [1985], p. 76.

⁵⁶ Levinas (2004) [2000], p. 128.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ “Private Holocaust” (or translated by some as “Personal Holocaust”) by Semel is a short story in the following collection: Nava Semel (1998) [1985]. *Hat of Glass*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶³ From *Prometheus Bound*, attributed to Aeschylus.

⁶⁴ Lev-Kenaan (2002).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶⁶ Semel (1998) “Private Holocaust,” p. 38.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶⁸ Gough (1975).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ An elaboration of the term, “voluntary spatial violence,” is required here. Voluntary spatial violence leads to the same results as forced spatial violence, that is, they both end up in the incarceration of the individual which prevents him or her from withdrawing from the closed space and gaining access to resources in the public sphere. In the voluntary case, the individual—and not an external force—decides to opt for confinement or spatial reduction. Remaining in the closed space, ostensibly a protected area that provides a “home,” involves a heavy price for the

individual who has to endure a private existence and minimize his or her being, but it still has a considerable advantage—it provides protection from external violent threats. See Shai Rudin (2012), p. 67.

⁷¹ The influence of an individual’s employment on his or her identity.

⁷² Semel, “Private Holocaust” (1998), p. 70.

⁷³ Semel (2001).

⁷⁴ de Lauretis (1987), pp. 25-26.

⁷⁵ Susan Sontag addressed the concept of Poland as an invaded space torn between three hegemonies in her novel: Susan Sontag (2001). *In America*. Picador.

⁷⁶ Semel (2001), p. 33.

⁷⁷ Here, I use the prefix “a” to indicate negation or a direct contrast or antithesis.

⁷⁸ This was his pen name. His official name was Yehiel Dinur and he was born Yehiel Feiner.

⁷⁹ Semel (2001), p. 24.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁸² Lubin (2001).

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Semel (2001), p. 44.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 199. This statement is translated by the author, S.R. All quotations from Hebrew are translated into English by the author unless otherwise specified.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁹² Semel (2009).

⁹³ Hannah Naveh (2002), pp. 13-14 (Heb.).

⁹⁴ As the story “Private Holocaust” illustrates.

⁹⁵ Doreen Massey (1994), p. 179.

⁹⁶ For the “myth of the waiting woman,” see Rich (1995) [1975]. Rich views the stereotype of “a woman waiting” (*ibid.* p. 39) as a central concept that explains the inferiority of the female gender (*ibid.*, pp. 38-39). Male supremacy stems, according to her argument, from the notion that man is an antithesis to the waiting woman; he acts and dictates instead of just watching.

⁹⁷ Goldberg (1937) [2007].

⁹⁸ Semel (2009), p. 10.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁰¹ Space above a lowered ceiling or in an attic where anything can be stored (Yiddish from German).

¹⁰² See Zuckermann’s review (Zuckermann, 2009) of the novel: *Australia*—also known as *The Lucky Country* and other names because it is so plenteous and expansive—is liberating, “so misery is less discomfoting.” But it is not capable of transforming sad and complex people into happy and simple people.

¹⁰³ Ben-Dov (2000).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Naveh (2002).