

Fractured Voices and Tensions in a Divided Land

Dvir Abramovich

They have not spoken for seven years. Not a word. On the surface they are enemies, sharing a violent, masochistic past, consisting of betrayals, white-hot hatred and attempted suicides. Then one day a letter arrives from one of the former lovers. It reads, “If you didn’t destroy this letter the moment you recognised my handwriting on the envelope, it shows that curiosity is stronger than hatred. Or else that hatred needs fresh fuel” (Oz 1993: 1).

Thus begins, *Kufsa Shchora* (hereinafter referred to as *Black Box*, 1993), one of Amos Oz’s most experimental and daring works. Originally published in Hebrew in 1987, this epistolary novel, by Israel’s most celebrated living author, was a gamble that broke new ground and paid off, becoming a bestseller and selling more than 70,000 copies in Israel in its first four months. It also won the foreign section of the French Prix Femina prize and The Boardman Tasker Memorial Prize. Jettisoning the comforts of a conventional narrative, Oz presents a novel comprised of an interlaced series of elongated, cerebral letters that probe the soul of the Jewish state and its people.

There is little action in *Black Box*. Most of the movement takes place at the psychological and emotional level. Yet Oz manages to invest his characters with rich layers of depth and complexity. Though a radical departure, it is noteworthy that this was not the first time Oz employed this classical European form. In the triumvirate of stories – *The Hill of Evil Counsel* (1976) – the third novella, “Mr Levi”, is composed entirely of letters.

Robert Nye praised the way Oz, “glories in human variety, and ... the skill with which he makes the passions of one family tragedy broaden out into a powerful picture of the ramifications of Israeli life. Here is a writer unafraid of displaying the full spectrum of the emotions, and a writer – be it noted – who actually seems to have some faith left in the future” (Nye 1988: 24). Equally enthused, Robert DiAntonio averred that, “With the publication of *Black Box*, Amos Oz

solidifies his reputation as one of the world's foremost writers" (DiAntonio 1998), while George Robinson, writing about the film version, asserted that Oz is "One of Israel's great gifts to world literature, a writer of subtlety, feeling and wit, a risk taker who isn't afraid to walk his tightrope without a net." (Robinson 2008). Even critic Yosef Oren, not usually an Oz fan, proclaimed the novel to be Oz's "most exciting and cogent ever" (Oren 1988: 46).

In essence, this is an allegorical novel about the human condition, anchored in an Israeli setting. It is about the enduring schisms and ideological streams that pulsate within the timbre of Israeli society, and which still cast a giant shadow over daily life. Specifically, it dramatises and meditates on the tension between secular and religious, Eastern European Jews and Oriental Jews, the left and right, veteran Israelis and immigrants. It is about the perennial religious and political strife that underwrites the complexities of the Israeli psyche. And it is also about familial conflict and trauma, underpinned by regret and yearning.

Black Box is also a story about divorce, about the great drama of men and women, and about how a marriage ends, but then continues. Above all, it is about how Israelis and Jews argue about the past and the future, and about the indissoluble relationship Israelis have with their embattled, but beloved, homeland. In many ways, this bond mirrors the treacherous, love/hate union of the two central protagonists. Here, Oz returns to one of his perdurable subjects, casting his unflinching gaze at the allure and danger of extremism, sparing neither the right nor the left. Finally, it is a novel about a family and about a nation.

The elegiac tone of the book is underscored by the three stanzas that precede the first chapter. They are taken from the poem "Weeping" by Nathan Alterman, in which the deceased speaker, shuddering, lost like a blind man, wishes to reunite with his lover who is still among the living. One of the central characters in the book, Alexander Gideon, exiled his ex-wife Ilana from his life. Since then, both have been lonely and unhappy. Like in the poem, Alexander, the living dead, still longs for his true love who appears in his nightmares and arouses his erotic yearnings.

Oz explained the basis for this novel: "I wanted to decipher the emotional, psychological – and I should say psychotic – mechanisms of fanaticism, discovering that fanaticism does not lie where most people expect it. It can be everywhere. I've seen left-wingers, pacifists, liberals – people who waved tolerance and patience – catch fanaticism and they will kill anyone who is not pluralistic enough" (Stone 1988). Oz has admitted that his experience as a soldier in several of Israel's

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wars cultivated within him at once a deeply felt aversion to fanaticism, which brought out only grief and death, and an unwavering belief in compromise" (Price 1995: 20).

The black box in the novel's title refers to the device that records the conversations in the cockpit, helping investigators determine the cause of an aircraft crash. It is this metaphor that functions as the spine and dramatic texture of the novel. From the title, we immediately gather that we are witnesses at the site of an accident, and the pages that we hold are the remnants from that explosion.

It is also the series of humid and impassioned letters, telegrams and memos traded between the various protagonists that open a Pandora's Box, and expose the breakdown of the marriage. Alex and Ilana, the novel's main protagonists, dredge up buried traumas that spill onto the page. They seek to uncover the answer to several riddles: not only why their marriage disintegrated, but why did Alex, for his part, question in court his parentage of Boaz, and steadfastly refused to admit that he was Boaz's father; and why did Ilana steadfastly refuse to allow a tissue test to determine paternity.

The exchanges serve as a kind of post-mortem. The two of them reconstruct the disaster that befell them and seek to uncover what went wrong in their union. The beauty of the epistolary novel is that it enables each of the characters to have their complex, distinctive voice. Another metaphor one could employ to describe the work is that it resembles a therapy session. Each character engages in self-introspection, analysing their childhood traumas, neuroses and traumas, with the reader acting as their attentive psychotherapist, or perhaps as voyeurs, eavesdropping on the intimate confessionals. Ilana questions Alex about their love and about their war. She asks him about their failed marriage, about his refusal to admit that he is his son's father. Oz manages to pull the reader into the interior lives and the tangled emotional machinations of his creations, and immediately sets them apart through their writing styles and concerns.

Hebrew Scholar Dan Laor shrewdly points out that the starting point for the novel corresponds to Agnon's short story *Metamorphosis* in that Oz, like Agnon, zooms on the dynamics between a couple in "the morning after" period, coming to grips with the finality of their marriage and life together (Laor 1987). Equally, the documents can be likened to confessional soliloquies that bring to light the inner voice of the characters, as they try and analyse the black box of their lives.

The novel unfolds over a relatively short time frame. It opens in February 1976 and ends in October of that same year. Yet, its narrative net is cast across three continents and spans more than several

generations. The setting of the story in 1976 is politically significant. Why? Because it is then that Israeli society was in the midst of massive changes. Following the disastrous 1973 Yom Kippur War, national consensus was being split apart, along with the hegemony of the Labour Party who had been in power for nearly three decades. The government of Yitzhak Rabin was in its death throes. Oriental Jews were casting aside their inferior status and assertively articulating their demands for equality. And along with the rise of the messianic religious tide, the West Bank was drawing aspiring entrepreneurs, keen to exploit its opening up for construction of new towns. A few months later in 1977, Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud party was swept to power, spurring a massive expansion of the settlement movement.

After seven years of silence since their divorce, Ilana writes a long letter to her former spouse, Alex Gideon (whom she refers to in the letters as Alec), seeking his urgent help with their sixteen-year-old delinquent son Boaz, who has been thrown out of school for hitting a teacher and has run away. The ostensible reason for the letter is to garner Alex's help. Yet, under the surface simmer unspoken and ungovernable desires. Though in her opening salvo the tortured Ilana declaims her love for Michel, her current husband, and her contentment with their routine life, the once unfaithful wife is still captivated by her estranged lover, harbouring a strong physical affection for him. It is no surprise that she ends the letter with a brazen note of temptation: "I'll even sleep with you if you want. When you want. And any way you want" (Oz 1993: 7). It seems that she still longs for the tropical hell of the past that has been replaced by domestic cosiness with her warm and affectionate husband. In a subsequent letter in which she charts her self-destructive urges for Alex, she admits: "My real motive for writing those two letters in February was a desire to place myself in your hands." (Oz 41).

Nothing in this novel is what it seems. We gradually come to realise that, since it was one letter that set-in motion the emotional juggernaut between Alex and Ilana, their supposed separation was only a make-believe suspension of their tempestuous union. Given their bitter divorce, which absolved Alex of all obligations to Ilana and Boaz, it is remarkable that Ilana is keen to re-establish the torrid relationship.

Ilana is now happily married to Michel Henri Sommo, a teacher of North African origin and an ambitious political activist who is committed to the concept of 'The Greater Land of Israel'. Together they have a three-year-old daughter, Yifat. Sommo is a member of The Jewish

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Fellowship movement, an ultra-nationalist religious organisation dedicated to settling the West Bank. Despite the seemingly idyllic life with Michel, Ilana is unable to sever her emotional, sexual obsession with Alex.

Her letters light the blaze of passion that once existed between the two, seducing Alex to resume contact. At first, Alex replies with his usual formal iciness. But increasingly, the impassive, isolated political science professor falls under the erotic spell of Ilana and responds with long letters. We soon discover that Ilana may be an unreliable narrator, admitting in her letters that what she has previously stated was a lie. In fact, Oz has warned his readers that all the letter writers in *Black Box* are lying, and since there is no omniscient narrator acting as guide, the reader has to assume the duty of a detective deciphering the lies.

This missive from Ilana triggers a round-robin of dispatches, telegrams and notes between Ilana, Alex, Michel, Boaz, Ilana's sister Rachel, and Alex's manipulative lawyer Manfred Zakehim, who handled the acrimonious divorce. The correspondence resonates with verbal fire, flaring with taunts, provocations, recriminations, complicated longings, political discourse, threats and finally compromise. The lengthy pages recall episodes and remembered dialogue from the past, interwoven with incidents from the present.

Like other Oz characters, Alex is an only son whose mother apparently committed suicide when he was aged five. He virtually raised himself on the expansive family estate, while his colourful, flamboyant father trotted around the world in pursuit of romantic flings. The isolation affected the boy, who grows up to be an intensely self-assured and imperturbable high-ranking officer in the army. It is when he meets Ilana that his withdrawnness is stripped away by the lethal sexual force of the relationship. Their marriage, however, does not endure.

From an early age, Alex betrayed his violent nature, very much like his son Boaz. In fact, in one outburst, Alex breaks the nose of his teacher when he hurls a chair at him, an act of aggression Boaz repeats twice when he beats up the teacher and nightwatchman at Telamim Agricultural High School, and later hits Michel's brother-in-law Abraham Abudarham with a crate.

We learn that their nine-year tempestuous marriage was wrecked by Alex's physical brutality and unbending cruelty, and Ilana's provocative, but meaningless affairs. Critic Elizabeth Pochoda describes Ilana as a "sex bomb and prevaricator, one of Oz's flamboyantly disruptive women" (Pochoda 1988: 796). In her letters

to Alex, Ilana vaunts of her excessively adulterous exploits as the quintessential raving nymphomaniac. She details her betrayals with his friends, army superiors, pupils, driver, the electrician and the plumber. In her own words, a "born harlot" (Oz 1993: 41), she is also described as a whore by her son, Rahab by Alex, and a dilapidated old car by his lawyer, Zakheim: "It looks as though the gent is keeping her well serviced: she looks pretty good for her mileage, especially bearing in mind how many times she's changed hands" (Oz 57). It is not surprising that one critic summed Ilana up as "all id" (Goodman 1988: C36).

It is, however, Alex, when explaining his doomed attraction for Ilana and her overpowering sexual exoticism, who graphically captures in a paragraph the essence of Ilana's allure:

You recognised an insect that was out of its mind at the smell of a female in heat. I didn't have a chance. You are stronger than I am, in the same ratio as the sun is stronger than snow. Have you ever heard of carnivorous plants? They are female plants that can exude a scent of sexual juices over a great distance, and the poor insect is drawn from miles away into the jaws that are going to close around it. It's all over Ilana. Checkmate (Oz 1993: 91).

One could argue that the common denominator linking Ilana and Boaz is their belief in the hedonistic ideal. Indeed, Ilana preaches to Alex about utilising the present to pleasure the body, justifying her many episodes of infidelity (Oren: 46).

Early on, after Alex divorces Ilana because of her extravagant and manifold adulterous episodes, Ilana joins her sister in the kibbutz, but six months later decides to leave and return to Jerusalem, without her eight-year-old son. Boaz grows up to be an illiterate, aggressive teenager, who is constantly in trouble with the law. Fond of referring to his mother as a whore, he expresses much resentment and spleen towards her whenever he chooses to speak with her. To give but one example, when Ilana comes down to his boarding school after he assaults one of the teachers and is about to be expelled, he refuses to see her: "Well, I went down there at once, but Boaz refused to see me. He merely sent word that he didn't want to have anything to do with that whore" (Oz 1993: 4).

Visiting Ilana and her second husband Michel, Boaz responds to Michel's scolding of his behaviour by insulting Ilana: "And you let that thing fuck you every night" (Oz: 3), revealing his sheer contempt and loathing. From his commune, he writes to Michel about Ilana's first visit:

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“We saw it when she came to visit. 100 percent normal she’s never been, but now she dropped down maybe below 50 percent”(Oz: 77). At the same time, Oz has Ilana herself acknowledging her maternal shortcomings: “I would never make a good mother, I said” (Oz: 188).

Why did Ilana allow Boaz, whom she describes as being disciplined, controlled and almost timid as a child, become a teenager simmering with hate and bitterness, who resorts to violence on any occasion when he does not get his way? If one bears in mind that Ilana is a woman who possesses such self-awareness so as to so eloquently bare her soul, it is difficult to understand why she allowed her son to become a petty criminal and an illiterate.

Ostensibly, Ilana re-initiates communication with Alex, seven years after their ignominious divorce, because of her problems with the wayward Boaz, and more specifically, his disappearance: “I’m writing to you because I don’t know what to do” (Oz: 4). Ilana chides Alex for his coldness and absence from his son’s life. Later, however, she reveals that her plea for assistance was merely an excuse, an opportunity to resume their love and hate relationship: “My real motive for writing those two letters in February was a desire to place myself in your hands” (Oz 41-42). It is reasonable to argue, therefore, that the resumption of correspondence with her ex-husband was not out of concern for Boaz’s welfare, but a scheme to enliven her mundane, suburban life.

Alex agrees to financially support Boaz (with whom he has had no contact) as well Ilana, Michel, and their daughter, parting with a significant portion of the fortune inherited from his father. This is despite the protestations of his wily and Machiavellian lawyer, Manfred Zakheim. Zakheim is part of the intellectual circle of German Jews who escaped to Palestine in the 1930s. Yet, unlike the pioneering fathers of the state who were animated by ideological fervour, Zakheim is driven by greed. The growth of permanent settlements in the territories presents an unparalleled opportunity for the scheming lawyer to turn a profit. Zakheim is credited with preserving Alex’s inheritance from the mad escapades of his father. Now, he is determined to ensure that Alex does not give away his inordinate wealth. Michel does not hesitate to ask Alex for funds to finance the building of additional settlements in the West Bank by his right-wing religious organisation. The resources Alex provides Michel with destabilise Ilana’s second marriage.

Slowly, trust develops between the small coterie of characters. Their letters assume a more honest and revelatory tone. A candid

correspondence flowers between Michel and Alex, who is intrigued by Michel's fanaticism and bond with Ilana and Boaz. Their flurry of letters grows into a fascinating meditation about the disparity between Michel's tenderness and open-minded approach to family life on the one hand, and his myopic political impulses on the other. Michel represents the emerging right in Israel, and, in Oz's view, the attendant frightening, blind righteousness exhibited by that segment concerning the role of the territories.

The novel implies that it is Michel and his contemporaries, driven by faith and ideology, who are now the true rulers, having wrested control of Israel's future from the Ashkenazi elite who had dominated Israeli society since its establishment. In a way, the book is a private lament by the author. It is lament about the loss of the Israel that he grew up in that will never return. Alex symbolises the generation of Israelis who in the 1970s had lost their path and their hope in the Zionist enterprise. It is telling that this native-born Israeli, a son of a pioneer and an Ashkenazi decorated combat soldier, is dying of cancer, while his Sephardi counterpart gains in stature and influence.

Alex is a decorated military hero. Now an internationally celebrated academic, he teaches at 'Midwest University' in Chicago. He is in a state of emotional paralysis and chilly isolation. Several of his messages are sent during his travels throughout Europe as a guest professor. His specialty is extremism, having written *The Desperate Violence: A Study in Comparative Fanaticism*, lauded for its clinical analysis of the phenomenon of messianic fervour. The treatise, which examines comparative totalitarian forces throughout history, explores the figure of the prototypical zealot and the savagery of Fascism, the church, militarism and even Zionism.

According to Alex, the root of humanity's inevitable annihilation is our insatiable need to be redeemed and to be saved. He calls this yearning, this aspect of orthodox theocracy, a theological disease. The perspicacious reader will notice the irony that Alex himself is infused with an obsessive single-mindedness (akin to many fanatics) that enabled him to turn his back on his son and on his true love. At one point in the book, he writes to Michel:

We annihilate ourselves (and shall soon wipe out our entire species) precisely because of our 'higher longings', because of the theological disease. Because of the burning need to be 'saved'. Because of an obsession with redemption. What is the obsession with redemption? Only a mask for a complete absence of the basic talent for life ... To sacrifice our lives

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cheerfully, to eradicate other people ecstatically, for the benefit of some vague false magic that seems to us to be a 'Promised Land'. Some kind of mirage that is considered 'superior to life itself'. And what on earth has not been considered superior to life itself? (Oz: 231-232).

Clive Sinclair has pointed out that the characters in *Black Box* "believe in the supremacy of eternal love, of the intellect, in happiness, in constant ecstasy, in redemption or some other messianic dream" (Sinclair 1988).

Oz agreed with that assessment: "Sceptical, relativist coward that I am, I am nonetheless intrigued by those people who have an affair with a certain totality, who see their choice as between gain everything or lose everything" (Sinclair 1988). In a case of life imitating art, in 2006 Oz penned a collection of essays, *How to Cure a Fanatic* (Oz 2012). In two fascinating essays, he presents illuminating insights into the true nature of fanaticism, writing: "The seeds of fanaticism always lie in uncompromising righteousness, the plague of many centuries" (Oz 2012: 57). Arguing that fanaticism is an "ever-present component of human nature" (Oz: 46), Oz nevertheless believes that it can be contained and dealt with through the power of imagination.

As the novel draws to a close, Alex, who has terminal cancer, joins Boaz and Ilana in the commune his son has built. Ilana leaves Michel and takes her daughter to care for the dying Alex, aware of the anger this will generate in Michel. This is the most unexpected of unifications but is consistent with Oz's theme of gradual transformation and conciliation. Michel, who believes Ilana and Alex are now sleeping together, takes Yifat and files for divorce. Though Ilana explains that she is there to nurse Alex during his final days, Michel remains unconvinced and unmoved by her appeals to restore their marriage.

At times sanctimonious, Michel, who speaks of the West Bank as the "liberated territories", shows great care for Boaz. Michel is a remarkable creation. Born in Algeria, he grew up under French rule and has known poverty and humiliation. Forced to leave his home in North Africa, the penniless Jew arrived in Israel via France. It was in Paris that he first received his grounding in Zionist indoctrination as a member of Betar. In Israel, he works on a construction site and later as a teacher. He regains his pride and dignity in the arms of right-wing religious Zionism. Michel and his compatriots believe that they can convince the Arabs to leave the lands they call Judea and Samaria by offering to buy their properties. His letters are dotted with biblical allusions and quotations.

Although Alex's liberal views on the role of the territories chime with Oz's public articulations, the only figure in the novel that is authentically depicted as a flesh and blood character, despite his zealotry, is Michel, the sensitive family man. Actually, in one interview, Oz remarked that even though the politics of his heroes are not necessarily his own personal politics, he always treats his characters with sympathy. He cited Michel as a case in point, stressing that although the politics of that character sharply diverged from his own, he afforded him a fair hearing and endowed him with a genuine voice, attempting to draw him in the most convincing way possible.

A close reading reveals that Michel is indeed painted with positive hues by Oz. It is Michel who assumes the parental role and it is Michel who becomes Boaz's surrogate father. He succeeds where Ilana fails – gaining the respect and trust of Boaz, to the point where the young man opens up to him, revealing his needs and wants. For instance, he helps in placing Boaz at Telamim Agricultural High School, arranges bail for him when he is arrested for possession of stolen goods, finds him a job through a friend, and carefully manages the money Alex sends, administering small sums to Boaz whenever he requests it. Through the letters, we witness Michel's tolerance of Boaz's outbursts and his exercise of a dose of stern fatherly love which the boy so desperately needs.

Sensitive to Boaz's yearning to become independent, he allows him to go his own way, coupled with tough moral supervision, rebuking him for his illiteracy and deportment when necessary. He also encourages him to follow in the orthodox ways of Judaism by peppering his letters with biblical quotations and advice, all the while earning Boaz's affection and Ilana's admiration: "I am fascinated by the way my husband and your son ... are silently fond of each other" (Oz 1993: 75). Michel, this "human diamond" (as Ilana writes of him) is also the perfect father for his daughter Yifat. Like her counterpart, Hanna Gonen in *My Michael* (Oz's second, and most renowned novel published in 1968), Ilana praises her husband's ardent care and total devotion to their child:

When I got home ... I found Michel asleep on a mattress at the foot of Yifat's bed, fully dressed and with his shoes on. His glasses slipped onto his shoulder ... It transpired that in the morning, after I had left ... on a sudden suspicion he had taken her temperature, and it turned out he was right. So he decided to call and cancel at the last minute the meeting he arranged

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with the deputy minister of defence, a meeting for which he had been waiting for almost two months (Oz: 156-157).

Rachel, Ilana's sister, realises that it is Michel who is the most emotionally capable of the two to deal with Boaz:

“Don't touch him, Ilana. If there's any necessity to get involved again, leave it up to Michel to take care of it” (Oz: 18). Afterwards, when Ilana writes to Rachel, making it clear that she still carries a torch for Alex, Rachel cautions her of repeating the same mistake she made with Boaz, leaving him in the kibbutz, in case Yifat is psychologically scarred as Boaz was: “Just try to understand that if you don't stop yourself now, Yifat will grow up exactly the same...What is it that drives you to throw away everything you have for the sake of something that doesn't and can't exist?” (Oz: 115). When Michel learns of Alex's illness, he first seeks his forgiveness for “the harsh and unnecessary insults I cast at you in my letter of two days ago ...” (Oz: 242). He suggests that Ilana and Yifat return home, and that after receiving treatment at Hadassah Hospital, Alex stay with them as their guest. He also implores Boaz to be close to this father and to care for him on his deathbed. More than that, Michel tells Alex that he has organised, through a cousin of his sister-in-law who works in the Hadassah oncology department, for special care when he is there, and for a blessing with Rabbi Bouskila. He also plans on praying for Alex's recovery at the Western Wall. The novel ends on hopeful note, with a kind of truce. In his last letter to Ilana, Michel quotes from Psalm 103, extending his forgiveness to his wife.

Not all agree. Journalist David Hammou, following the decision to award Oz the Israel Prize for Literature in 1998, took the author to task for his portrayal of Sephardi characters in his canon. Hammou opined that Oz is the voice of the Ashkenazi elite, and beyond that closed world “...live the Others...There are the non-Ashkenazi Jews, shadow figures at the dark edge of the stage – faceless, sensual, primitive, always arousing the repressed sexuality in the rational, educated Ashkenazi. Their otherness is only compounded by their being right-wing and traditional” (Hammou 1988: 58). There were others who levelled criticism at Oz for his condescending and unflattering portrayal of Michel. This criticism was largely based on a passage in which Zakheim conveys his impression of Michel after their first meeting. The reductive description does abound with demeaning stereotypes:

... well, it turns out that this Mr. Sommo begins (like the rest of us) on the ground, but he terminates abruptly at five foot three or thereabouts. In other words, he is a good head shorter than she is. Perhaps she bought him cheap, by the yard. And so this African Bonaparte appears in my office wearing permanent-press slacks, a check jacket a little large for him, curly-haired, uncompromisingly clean-shaven, drenched in radioactive after-shave ... These people have apparently undergone, on the way from Africa to Israel, a thoroughgoing refit in Paris ... That ape, unabashed, smiles a sweet, sanctimonious smile at me ... And so, at last, I managed to ruffle his calm. The Parisian patina shattered and the African fury erupted like pus" (Oz 1993: 20-23).

In a biting and trenchantly critical essay, Ariel Hirschfield blasted Oz for his depiction of Michel, writing:

Suppressed, racist and aggressive hatred towards the Sephardi bubbles throughout this book, simultaneously admiring and greatly fearing his might. Oz is unwilling to disengage from the uniform image of the motherland. This is why he was forced to endow the Ashkenazi protagonists with so-called aristocratic-poetic and elegiac dimensions so as to balance out the mythological demonism that emerges from the Sephardi side (Hirschfield 1990).

In a joint letter, fellow authors A.B. Yehoshua and Yehoshua Kenaz defended Oz and took Hirschfield to task. They wondered how Hirschfield "allowed himself to sin by expressing himself so offensively and so brutally" (Yehoshua and Kenaz 1990). The novel's true purpose was, in their view, to call attention to the seriousness of:

... the ethnic conflict ... in the letters that form the book there are scathing statements about the established Israel and new Israel. It is clear that the author does not insert his own view about this conflict, but points out the inherent tragedies and dangers, while unmistakably seeking reconciliation, forgiveness, peace and reconciliation, especially from the Israel that had been neglected by the established Israel. To claim that racist and aggressive hatred towards the Sephardi bubbles throughout this book is a blatant injustice to the novel's real aim and an incorrect literary reading" (Yehoshua and Kenaz).

Oddly, Alex agrees to transfer vast sums to Michel, notwithstanding his strong distrust of Michel whom he considers an extremist. Part of Alex's motivation is to sunder Ilana's marriage by corrupting Michel. The money does change Michel. He leaves his teaching post, and before long is transformed from the timid, solicitous husband and father – qualities that drew Ilana to him when they first met – to a self-important, shrewd businessman. Now dressed in a suit, Michel mixes with prominent officials as he slowly buys up property in the territories. It is to Oz's credit and skills that the frailties of both men are much to the fore, eliciting the reader's sympathy. For Alex, Michel's quest for messianic salvation is a sign of the zealot's incapacity to savour the beauty and joys of ordinary life.

Critic John Slepokura describes Michel as the "quintessentially regressive fanatic, whose whole identity is derived from his religiosity, which says something about the fear with which Oz views such people; and he clearly has little patience for their convictions and attitudes" (Slepokura 1990). Slepokura then remarks that this group "are a growing force demographically and will have considerable political clout in twenty years' time. If his ideas are to influence any beyond the Progressive Left of the Labour Party and the Israeli Writers Association, it is to these groups that he will have to present his ideas, to convince them that no other alternative exists. A more formidable challenge, involving a more intractable set of adversaries, can hardly be imagined" (Slepokura).

Interestingly, Alex and Michel have much in common. Both are fuelled by zealotry. Both exhibit signs of cruelty and an undercurrent of tyranny and ruthlessness towards Ilana. Both love the same woman, but are unable to dominate or tame her raging, treacherous sexuality. Both realise that she will never belong to neither. Both are at times hypocrites, propelled by ideology to buttress and justify their own actions. And both become rivals engaged in a tug of war, battling not only for Ilana's loyalty, but for the soul and affection of Boaz, who represents the next generation of Israelis.

Yet, there are stark differences. Michel is good-hearted and an affectionate family man. Alex is the archetypal loner, always strategising, always calculating. Michel is infused with Zionist ardour, while Alex the warrior, who has served and fought in Israel's wars, cares little about the territories.

Like Michel, Ilana is an immigrant born to a poor family. Arriving in Israel with her parents and sister from Poland at the age of five, she lived with her family in a wooden shed near the city of Nes Tziona. After losing her father to a freak accident when she was twelve, and her mother to illness a year later, Ilana and her sister were sent to a

live on kibbutz Beit Avraham. Joseph Cohen sees Ilana in mythical terms, as the embodiment of a liberated, feminine force. He observes that she is at once a positive mother figure and a destructive goddess. It is worth quoting at length his shrewd assessment:

She carries out all of the functions of the fructifying feminine spirit. Not hemmed in by patriarchal concepts of dominance, she has freely bestowed her favours on scores of men so that the whole earth might be enriched ... She gives birth to a boy and a girl, lives close to the earth, celebrating its seasons, its turns and returns, waits patiently for renewal, nurturing with her maternal strength all who come within her sway. And traditionally, she fulfils the woman's role in readying the male for his burial by tending to Alec's needs, washing and dressing him, feeding him, cleaning him when he no longer can control his functions. (Cohen 1990: 177).

On one reading, Ilana could be seen as the Land of Israel, an earthy female figure, torn between the polar divisions, over whom the two men fight. Elizabeth Pochoda believes that Oz uses *Black Box* as an allegorical enquiry into the failure of Zionism. In her view, the pioneering dream of Palestine as a connected federation of rural communities was transformed into the "nightmare of domination" (Pochoda: 797). Further, Pochoda claims that Oz investigates this theme through the device of his women protagonists, especially Ilana. She references a quote by Oz that the Zionist enterprise was far more demanding on women, and goes on to say that:

If you put them all together, the women in Oz's novels know pretty much what there is to know about the spirit of total disillusionment cast by Zionism's attempt to produce the best country in the world ... It's not so much that Ilana has little to do in either of her marriages except iron shirts and boil vegetables, or that she realises the egalitarian ideal of Zionism did not apply to women ... There is a deeper malaise here, which comes to two addictions: one to domination and the other to the idea of perfection ... Ilana shuttles between them expressing faith in something she calls "happiness" and reminding them in one of her most beautiful letters that "there is a land, but we have not found it" (Pochoda: 797).

Boaz is a fascinating character. He hates his mother and father. The rebellious and errant son, damaged by the painful divorce, and who

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courts trouble and violence, is a study in contradictions. Barely literate, the untamed, anarchic hippie founds an Edenic commune on his grandfather's abandoned and dilapidated estate in Zikhron Yaakov where his father grew up. Zikhron Yaakov was one of the first towns created by the early Zionists in Palestine, and the commune bears an uncanny resemblance to the pioneering kibbutzim with its adherence to the principles of egalitarianism, companionship and the reclaiming of the land through hard work.

This new community of lost souls is not fuelled by drug-taking or mere escapism, but is undergirded by the humanistic values of love, compassion and individual freedom. A modern Garden of Eden, it is a haven for those who have rejected the bloodshed, hatred and acrimony of the conflict. Boaz erects a new utopia on the ruins of his grandfather's abode and becomes the guide for his failed forebears who have lost their way. The young man eventually turns his back on both of his fanatical father figures. He has created his own promised land, offering the possibilities of a new future. The prophetic vision Oz offers in *Black Box* is of a Middle East devoid of radicalism, Jewish or Arab. It is a world composed of quiet moments, devoid of the typical madness and Messianism Israelis and Palestinians have grown fatigued of and underwritten by a mundane reality. It is family, rather than politics, the pursuit of happiness, rather than the pursuit of heavenly ambitions, that is the hallmark of this longed-for world. In many ways, it is Ilana who represents this – a political reality whereby it is the richness and fullness of life that matter above all.

On another level, the space the Boaz creates is a repudiation of his stepfather's attempt to mould him in his ideological image. He shuns the agricultural boarding school in Kiryat Arba Michel sends him to. Beyond never feeling at home, it is telling that Kiryat Arba (which borders Hebron) fits in with the absolutist settler philosophy of land acquisition. Boaz's rejection of the agricultural school in favour of his own community, based on co-existence and the accommodation of many different dogmas, is a clear dismissal of the older generation's fixation on the past. He is not interested in delving into the past or into national divisions. He rejects Michel's right-wing ideology and hatred of the Arabs. At one point he writes, "I don't believe that what the state needs is to keep conquering the Arabs and take their places away from them. In my opinion, we should leave them alone and they should leave us alone" (Oz 1993: 178). One could argue that Boaz represents the new 'Sabra' who will neutralise the destructive currents of religious Zionism.

Yet, he does redeem the land in Zikhron Yaakov, reviving it through manual labour. Interestingly, he retains some affinity to Michel when

he states in one of his letters that he cares for the country and is a Zionist. Likewise, he shares some characteristics with his father. Like Alex, he wanders off, losing himself in the jungle of the mansion. Like Alex, he is lonely, seeking the unknown. One reviewer saw echoes of Oz's childhood in the figure of Boaz, observing that the "self-orphaned Amos would be left to commune with Spinoza in the desert. No wonder the wounded emblematic child shows up so often in his novels, from Boaz in *Black Box* with the look of Jesus in a Scandinavian icon" (Leonard 2004: 16).

Lacking any structure or control, the almost saintly Boaz displays surprising signs of generosity, sensitive insight, ingenuity and industriousness. He cares little for writing. And indeed, his letters are redolent with misspellings. Boaz loves his country, but is uninterested in politics. Boaz, ruler of his harem in Zikhron, dominates the gaggle of ethnically diverse girls whom he keeps for their labour and loins, and who grace the pages of the narrative to merely serve as inferior mistresses, but nothing more: "Right now I'm with those two chicks, making them work and giving them a good time, eating, working a little, fucking ..." (Oz 1993: 140).

Readers au fait with the Oz canon will immediately recognise the love triangle, which often looms large in the author's writing. The husband is an intellectual who is disciplined and detached from his feelings. The wife is emotive, wild, temperamental, ready to explode. They harbour hostile, destructive love for each other and the woman is almost enslaved to her husband.

Black Box contains possible analogues to another of Oz's masterpieces, *My Michael*. Like Michael Gonen of *My Michael*, Alex is an academic. Alex can furnish incisive analyses of historical and political events, while Michael Gonen adeptly probes the layers of geological strata. Yet both are unable to understand the submerged eroticism and deep recesses of their wife's soul. Similarly, Ilana shares a kinship with Hanna Gonen of *My Michael*. She is drawn to both men and is torn between the two polar personalities. Like Michael Gonen, Michel Sommo represents the stable, loyal and devoted partner who sustains their quotidian marriage. Like Michael Gonen, he assumes parental duties for their child and for Boaz. Still, Ilana is bewitched and captivated by her first husband, who like the Arab twins in *My Michael*, symbolises the violent, forbidden and transgressive experience she destructively craves.

The epistolary choice, and the resulting chorus of views and outlooks, should not surprise the reader. The form reflects Oz's long-life view that Israel should be a hub of many clashing voices. In

essence, the polyphony of opinions and attitudes evident in the book is the antidote to the fundamentalists who believe that Israel should speak as one. Beyond that, this classical, 18th century format dazzles with its postmodern sensibility. Since the novel does not consist of an all-knowing narrator, there is not one specific principal who is ascribed moral or ideological authority. Rashomon style, each character is given the space to argue their case and to proffer their own rationale for their point of view and behaviour. It is up to the reader to ascertain from the volley of letters and individual sermons, who is right. Oz requires his readers to analyse the information and details provided by the gallery of speakers and reach their own conclusions about the righteousness of their position. We are invited to piece together the trail of misery from the crisscrossing dialogue.

It is small wonder that some critics saw the novel as an allegory of the struggle between western-liberal values and Oriental fundamentalism. Yet, this misconstruing of the novel straitjackets and reduces a multiplex work into neat and convenient stereotypes. Indeed, the sympathetic portrayal of Michel works against such a simplistic interpretation. Gradually, the varying motivations and shifting loyalties of the different characters become clear. One could venture the observation that each is groping and yearning for spiritual tranquillity and redemption. At first glance, the most obvious meaning of the novel is Oz's rebuke of Likud's Greater Israel policy. And though Oz has often argued against reading his novels as overt political tracts, one is hard pressed not to see *Black Box* as the author's attempt to depict the country as one unhappy family, struggling to reconcile the clashing religious, social, political and economic threads that form the unique quilt of Israeli society.

One can also argue that the crossfire of letters hints at the power of words and conversation to melt the arctic heart that has turned icy and stony because of a long, dead-end conflict. What becomes apparent as the novel draws to a close is the incremental change that each character experiences and their evolving understanding of the antinomies that lie within. Michel and Alex turn their initial quarrelling into meaningful exchanges, and there are hints of hopeful reconciliation of the seemingly irreconcilable opposites.

In other words, Ilana oscillates between two world views, between Eastern Europe and the orient, between the dominating, ruling elite of the Ashkenazi as embodied in Alex, and the emerging ambitions of the Sephardi underclass symbolised by Michel.

It's difficult not to suggest that Oz is painting, writ large, a portraiture of the collapse of the over-confident, elitist, secular,

Ashkenazi-labour bastion that ruled Israel for three decades. Critic Hada Boshes opines that *Black Box* is a literary companion piece to Oz's 1982 non-fiction book *In The Land of Israel*, in which the author prophesied about the end of secular Zionism and the takeover of religion as expressed amongst Israel's Arab Jews (Boshes 1987). In that vein, we notice that Oz juxtaposes the fate of the two Israeli archetypes, Alex and Michel. Zakheim, during his first encounter with Michel, prophesies the political rise of the national camp that was actualised in the 1977 elections: "I can promise you almost for certain ... that one day you will see this Sommo sitting in Parliament and firing long, devastating patriotic salvos at do-gooders like you and me" (Oz 1993: 21).

We can reflect that the three men who belong to the pioneering Ashkenazi dynasty are all afflicted with some crippling disease that defeats their mind and body. Volodya Gudonski lives out his days in a mental institution suffering from sclerosis. Alex is beset by cancer and returns to breathe his last breath in his dilapidated childhood home. Boaz, the third generation of the Gideon lineage, spreads a reign of terror and chaos through various eruptions and assaults. The grand old labour left is in stasis. It is paralysed, arrogant, ailing. In contrast, Michel is animated by devotion to his cause and to the ideal of the 'Greater Land of Israel'. He pushes aside the contempt of the enlightened, intellectual left, and works tirelessly to buy up lands in the territories so as to speed up the Jewish people's redemption. A further ironic element is that it is Alex's generous gifts (realised from selling property within Israel proper) that fund Michel's and his group's acquisitions in Hebron, in a kind of perverse collaboration that is literally consummated by Zakheim's son in law's collaboration with Michel.

The novel ends with Psalm 103, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever" (Oz: 259). Perhaps what Oz is saying here is that the possibility of resolution between adversaries does exist. It is borne out of the weary acceptance that division and enmity must eventually be exhausted. It is telling that the last voice we hear is that of Michel. He has endured, while his rival has died.

Similarly, the novel demonstrates the ability of the writer and literature to transcend the simplicity of current events and to show the vital importance of individuals in changing the landscape. On another level, Oz's allegory may point to the decline of the secular, Zionist vision, overshadowed by the rise and surge of the right embodied in the Likud victory of 1977. Consider that Gideon, the representative of

the generation of native-born, a war hero, abandons his wife and his country and at the end, succumbs to cancer.

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