

Avraham Balaban. *A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction: Postmodernist Israeli Fiction*. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1995. 265 pp. (Hebrew).

The most creative and innovative Hebrew authors of the 1980s and 1990s are the ones who have challenged their predecessors who were central to the literary scene of the 1960s and 1970s. In their writings, the desire to organize a chaotic world in meaningful terms, manifested in the work of Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, Aharon Appelfeld, and Amalia Kahana-Carmon, has given way to the abandonment of conventional narrative structure as well as the attempt to find meaning in the life of the group of the individual. Attempts to reveal the psychological processes motivating human actions have been supplanted in the new generation by a focus on random encounters between characters and pointless or mechanical responses to events.

Whereas the New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s produced dense, multilayered, richly allusive styles, the postmodern writers are often colloquial; their style is devoid of intertextual allusions. Balaban suggests that the reason for this transformation lies in the political breakdown of the relatively unified ideological system of Labor Zionism in the wake of the Yom Kippur War. The change in leadership in 1977 was yet another manifestation of the profound social crisis of the 1970s. Though religious, ethnic, and regional tensions existed before, it was in the 1980s that these tensions erupted in critical and transformative ways. The loss of ideological certainty is reflected in chaotic, analogous plots based on coincidence rather than development. The narrators

lack authority, the stories are often narrated from several points of view or an unreliable one. The characters are flat, interchangeable; the protagonist is fragmented, lacking a coherent ego, isolated from a social and family context. Motifs of insanity, breakdown, and suicide are common. The boundaries between reality and fantasy, dream and perception, are fluid, and it is not always clear what is “really” happening and what is being imagined.

Balaban is aware of the multiple and various definitions of literary postmodernism, as well as of the visible influence on the Israeli authors he discusses of the crisis of Western value systems and Western postmodern writing. He concedes that the boundary between modernism and postmodernism is at times rather fluid. Nevertheless, he argues convincingly that there is no mistaking the emerging postmodern trend in Hebrew letters. Furthermore, Balaban identifies this trend as leaning less toward solipsistic self-reflectiveness. Despite the “metaliterary” tendency of several authors to question the ability of language to reflect reality or communicate anything meaningful about it, most Israeli authors tend to be reality-oriented. They no longer try to impose a meaningful structure on the reality they invoke, but their descriptions refer to an identifiably Israeli context, its problems, paradoxes, and tensions. Several authors use their postmodern writing as a social and cultural critique. This critique is radical; it questions some of the basic premises and stated goals of the state, and it does so far more thoroughly and unflinchingly than the critiques of their predecessors of the 1960s and 1970s. In Balaban’s words: “The fiction of the last decade disengaged, partially, from the norm of ‘the prophet of the House of Israel,’ but not from Israel” (p. 76).

The first part of the book is a theoretical overview of postmodernism and its manifestations from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s. The second part of the book is made up of six chapters. The third and fourth discuss Avraham Hefner, while the others are devoted to such authors as Haim Lapid, Yuval Shimoni, Amnon Navot, and Yitzhak Laor. The first chapter in the second part deplores the critical neglect of Haim Lapid. Balaban argues that Lapid was a pioneer in his presentation of the secular character as lacking the basic mechanism with which to interpret reality. He emphasizes the innovative patterns Lapid used in his novel *The Secret Notes of My Deputy*,<sup>1</sup> namely, doubles, multiple endings, and multiple narrative frames. Ultimately,

1. The English titles of the novels discussed in this article are my own translations.

Lapid makes the point that no one narrative reflects a person's life. Each person is the sum of several possible narratives he tells about him- or herself.

The second chapter deals with Yuval Shimoni's *The Dove's Flight*, emphasizing its unique presentation of the cruel randomness that shapes individual lives. Balaban presents us with two analogous plots evolving in the same place, Paris, but disconnected from each other. The plots are stylistically asymmetrical: one is mimetic realism, the other uses the stream of consciousness. The plot lines clash randomly, and their intersection points up the profound difference between them; the one describes a Parisian woman about to commit suicide, and the other describes a married American couple vacationing in Paris.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss Avraham Hefner's novel *The Interpreted Book*. Here the narrator and the author themselves emerge as fictive characters. The author is a text. Characters in the novel discuss books and characters in books that reflect them to the point of blurring the distinction between fictional and real characters. Hefner suggests that literature, like religion, often mediates and thus distorts people's perceptions of life and reality. He implies that reality is monstrous and ought to be confronted by each individual without the distorting mediation of texts. In this and in subsequent works, the use of cinematographic techniques is highly visible, yet another characteristic of the postmodern movement in Israeli letters.

Amnon Navot's *The Deserters' Captors* focuses on the ruthlessness of trainees in the military police. This difficult novel explores a dark corner of Israeli society: the process of training unwilling soldiers and preparing them for a military career they are reluctant to pursue. The process results in death, insanity, and desperate efforts to survive with dignity in a context offering neither dignity nor validation.

Chapter 6 discusses Yitzhak Laor's presentation of a group of soldiers desperately trying to survive in a threatening world. *A People, a Royal Meal* is a political and psychological novel centering on the individual's attempt to remain autonomous despite pressures to conform. Balaban suggests that Laor offers an incisive critique of the Zionist ethos using Lacanian terms of reference.

*A Different Wave in Hebrew Fiction* is a serious assessment of a recognizable trend in contemporary Hebrew fiction. What I miss in this book is a critical distance, a distance assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of the phenomenon it describes. While the development Balaban sketches out may be worthy of our attention, there is much in it that is trendy

and fashionable. Balaban's celebration of the sophisticated techniques of disconnection and disorientation raises the question of the use of literature in a society already fragmented and confused. When is a work an aestheticist exercise, or even a commercial effort, and when is it worthy of our serious attention? This question is the critical conundrum the book avoids at the risk of giving too much credence to a passing fad.

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