

Homogeneity vs. Heterogeneity in the Young Adult and Children's Literature of Devorah Omer

ABSTRACT

Devorah Omer (1932–2013) is one of the most prominent, successful, and esteemed children's and young adult writers in modern Israeli history. Over the course of fifty years her fiction has shaped the worldview of her readers—their ideological stances, attitudes towards society, and perspectives on the nation's past. By referring to some of her novels from the 1960s and '70s, the article demonstrates the structure of her fiction. Omer's novels portray a process by which protagonists, who come from the social periphery, become part of the social center. Although the protagonists depict an alternative perspective, as the plot progresses their critical voice gradually fades away, and they assume the mantle of the hegemonic culture they had originally opposed. Hence, Omer's fiction speaks simultaneously in two voices: the hegemonic voice of the national collective and the heterogeneous voice of the liberal state. This way the novels represent—and exemplify—the tension between these opposed tendencies of contemporary Israeli society.

DEVORAH OMER (1932–2013) IS ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT, SUCCESSFUL, and esteemed children's and young adult writers in modern Israeli history. Her oeuvre, spanning over fifty years, includes over one hundred books on which myriads of Israeli children have grown up, identifying with her heroes, sharing their joy and pain, and experiencing their emotions and feelings. Her fiction has thus shaped the worldview of generations of readers—their ideological stances, attitudes towards society, and perspectives on the nation's past.

Omer's position in the Israeli children's literature canon is well established, reflected in the many awards she has received. Early in her career (1959), she was awarded the Yatziv Prize for *Tamar's Pages*, originally published in the children's journal *Davar Liyeladim*.¹ This was followed by numerous other accolades, including the Prime Minister's Award (1980), the Israel Prize (2006), and the Israeli Arts Directory ACUM prize for lifetime achievement (2013). The fact that her books have been warmly embraced by the literary establishment is not only confirmed by these awards, but also by the dozens of favorable newspaper articles dedicated to her and her works. Her fiction continues to form an integral part of the Israeli elementary-school curriculum, and the reading of her books is often accompanied by educational activities that have become traditions in their own right. For example, when children read *Sarah, Heroine of Nili*, they also visit Beit-Ahronson in Zichron Yaakov. In the past, the reading of *Ben-Yehuda's Eldest Son* was concluded by holding a mock trial of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

Another indication of Omer's popularity can be found in various reading surveys that have been conducted over the years. In an extensive Grade 6 poll conducted in 1977, Omer was the most popular author among girls and boys alike.² In 1989, she ranked seventh on the list of best-loved authors of both children's and adult literature.³ The same year, *To Love until Death* (1980) was chosen as one of the two most popular children's books within the education system.⁴ Her large readership also ensured her a steady income: Omer herself frequently noted that she was one of very few Israeli writers to earn her living by her fiction.⁵

Omer was sixteen when her stories appeared in *Bama'aleh*, the organ of the Federation of Working and Studying Youth. Between 1957 and 1962, she published *Tamar's Pages* in *Davar Liyeladim*; these columns were subsequently turned into a series of books.⁶ In 1967, she published seven books, including two novels—*Sarah, Heroine of Nili*, and *Ben-Yehuda's Eldest Son*.⁷ The widespread popularity of these books established Omer in the public consciousness as a preeminent children's historical/biographical novelist.

Omer's popularity within the realm of Israeli children's literature during the end of the 1960s and early 1970s coincided with numerous socio-cultural changes taking place in Israel, all of which led to the strengthening of the civil society. This was brought about by several factors, including the decline in the power of the leftwing and increase in the influence of the right, the assimilation of immigrants from Islamic countries (Mizrahi), the growth of the economy (and with it a higher standard of living), the development of a new middle class, and the tightening of economic and cultural relations with the US that led to an increasing Americanization of Israeli culture.⁸

An examination of Omer's books—in particular the ones published during those years—demonstrates her sensitivity to the mood and social-cultural processes of the time and her ability to respond to them. Many of her books depict the Americanization of Israeli culture. Omer was one of the first authors in the early 1970s to publish books dealing with adolescence and its challenges; her *Mommy, Teenager—Or the Grief of Raising Parents* (1971) and *Mommy, Teenager Plus* (1974) contributed greatly to the emergence of the new view of youth as “foolish-agers” (*gil ha-tipesh-esre*), a play-on-words based on the American concept of “teenagers”. Also demonstrating her orientation towards the individual, Omer's books for preschool children, including *I Built a Tower from Blocks* (1976) and *The Lost Kiss* (1978), introduced psychological elements into literature for toddlers and young children. These stories, addressing emotional-behavioral issues and ways of coping with them, were the first to exemplify the “problem literature” genre, which subsequently flooded the Israeli market in the 1980s and '90s.

The ability to sense the tone and mood of Israeli society is most strikingly evident, however, in the themes Omer addresses in her books for teens and young adults. By raising topics such as Israeli identity, the relationship between the individual and the State, the status of Mizrahi immigrants within Israeli society, and Jewish-Arab relations, Omer portrayed the disappearance of the Yishuv collective and the emergence of Israeli society. Omer's books are not only interesting in that they were a response to the existing culture but they also frequently reflected processes that had only just begun. They thus played a significant role in shaping and molding cultural changes.

Towards the 1960s, Israeli children's literature gradually began to free itself from the nationalistic roles it had played since its initial stages. A process of normalization was manifested in the acceptance of new forms of writing, the emergence of popular literature, and a turn towards new thematics bearing a more individual nature.⁹ A similar shift also took place in children's newspapers towards the end of 1950s.¹⁰ Despite the infiltration of liberal worldviews and individual themes, however, the Zionist narrative and hegemonic national collective continued to dominate the literary scene.¹¹

Research addressing Omer's work thus far has tended to identify it as representing the hegemonic stance and continuing the tradition of national children's literature.¹² I suggest that Omer's fiction is more complex. Her fiction from the 1960s and '70s speaks simultaneously in two voices: the hegemonic voice of the national collective, and the heterogeneous voice of

the liberal state. This ambivalence aligns Omer's oeuvre with the children's literature written in Palestine in the 1930s and '40s, which did not always blindly accept the dictates of the labor hegemony but undermined them, subverted them, or offered an alternative.¹³

Omer's novels seek to settle the conflict between the heterogeneity promoted by the liberal-democratic state and the uniformity endorsed by the national collective. This goal is achieved through the type of protagonist she chooses and the processes she or he undergoes. Omer's protagonist comes from the social periphery and thus often criticizes Israeli society, but ultimately by gradually giving up his or her "otherness", understanding it to have been merely an illusion—she/he becomes part of the "center".¹⁴ Omer's novels thus contain voices that criticize the hegemonic narrative and seek to undermine its view of reality, while simultaneously erasing the distinctive features of the collective and depicting it as hegemonic and unified.

By focusing on Omer's representation of the tension between heterogeneity and homogeneity within Israeli society, this essay seeks to depict how Omer's realistic social and historical novels translate the socio-political reality of Israel in the late 1960s and '70s into literary form, making it understandable and relevant to a young readership. The first part of the article shows the Israeli society that Omer portrays—a society comprised of protagonists from the social or historical margins, whose views deviate from, oppose, and undermine the hegemonic narrative. The second section delineates the reverse process: the uniformization of her characters as they surrender their own view of reality, accept the hegemonic perspective, and ultimately become part of the homogenous collective or, at least, acknowledge its validity.

MARGINALITY

Many of Omer's protagonists come from the social, political, ethnic, or gender margins of society. Taboul-Shahar in *Divers Onward!* (1968) and Rama in *Flying High* (1974), for example, are Mizrahi immigrants;¹⁵ Gila, in *I'll Overcome* (1970) is a young woman with disabilities; the group of children in *The Other Side of the Road, or the Alumim Youth Band* (1973) come from "the other side of the tracks". The heroes of her historical novels also frequently bear the mark of the outsider: Ben-Zion Ben-Yehuda in *Ben-Yehuda's Eldest Son* lives in his father's shadow and observes the epic story of the revival of the Hebrew language from his marginal

position. Even Sarah Aharonson has something of the “other” in her, as her identification with the political right-wing led to her exclusion from Zionist historiography by socialist parties.¹⁶ In choosing such protagonists, Omer views Israeli society and its history from a non-hegemonic perspective, thereby undermining the uniformity of Israeli identity and the Israeli narrative.¹⁷

This practice can be exemplified via an analysis of *Ben-Yehuda's Eldest Son*, her first historical novel. In addition to its national-didactic theme—the struggle to revive the Hebrew language—the novel contains another, secondary, and perhaps even contradictory, motif: the suffering the “founding fathers” caused their families.¹⁸ The book thus possesses two thematic foci that pull in opposite directions. The first sympathetically describes and justifies Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's obstinate fight to revive the Hebrew language, while the second criticizes the way in which he sought to achieve this goal. The reader is thus presented with a narrative that both lauds the deeds of the founding fathers and at the same time critiques and undermines them.

Omer did not invent the idea of the father who sacrifices his son on the altar of the struggle to revive the Hebrew language, but took it from Itamar Ben-Yehuda's own autobiography,¹⁹ in which he states that his father declared that he was “sacrificing his son on the altar of the revival of the Hebrew speaker.”²⁰ While Itamar Ben-Yehuda does not discuss this issue beyond the chapters he devotes to his very early childhood, Omer turns it into the one of the central themes of her biography, thereby providing an account, not only of the revival of the Hebrew language, but also of the suffering it inflicted on Ben-Yehuda's family and on his eldest son, Ben-Zion, in particular.

The novel's bi-directional pull is embodied in the ambivalent portrait of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Despite depicting him as totally committed to the Hebrew language, his “fanaticism” does not possess the same sacred status as that reflected in the children's literature of the Yishuv period.²¹ On the one hand, his “madness”, i.e., his persistence, stubbornness, and determination, is a value to be admired, as Ben-Yehuda's wives constantly tell Ben-Zion when they unquestioningly accept the sacrifice they are asked to make on behalf of their husband's folly. On the other hand, it also gives the impression of pathology. The nicknames “madman” and “Yudke the crazy”, given to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda by his critics, ironically correspond to the narrator's own attitude towards him. The reader is made aware of this aspect of Ben-Yehuda's character as early as the third page of the book, when Devorah, his first wife, sings a song to Ben-Zion in Russian and Eliezer erupts violently at her:

“What are you doing?!” She had never seen him so upset. His face went an awful purplish black. He tore the paper he was carrying in his hand into tiny pieces and flung them on the floor . . . He approached her, trembling with anger. Then he began to cough and choke, a reddish foam rising to his lips.²²

Not only does Omer portray Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, here and in many other passages, as possessed by frenzy, but she also questions his conduct and ethical principles in numerous other episodes. She portrays him as a man whose private life and public activities are inseparable; the latter frequently taking precedence over the former. He fails to take his family’s needs into consideration, and, as father and husband, is indifferent to both their feelings and their fate. Ben-Zion’s statement “Dad loves Hebrew more than us” resonates throughout the novel, concretized in various scenes.²³

Omer’s description of Eliezer’s reaction to the imminent birth of the family’s fourth child is another example of Eliezer’s obsessive dedication to his work and his indifference to his family’s fate. When Eliezer goes to ask for a Jewish midwife, his ultra-Orthodox rivals refuse to let him reach her house. Devorah beseeches him to call Salima, the Arab neighbor, but he responds that “she doesn’t speak Hebrew. I wouldn’t want . . .”²⁴ Although he finally gives in and fetches her, the baby is born before the midwife’s arrival and has difficulty breathing. Eliezer then rushes to a monastery on Mount Scopus to bring a monk who serves as a doctor. Having checked on both mother and baby, the monk speaks with Eliezer in French, and leaves with an anxious look on his face. When the worried Ben-Zion asks his father what he discussed with the monk, it seems like Eliezer completely forgot his wife and his new born baby, and proudly tells Ben-Zion that he “asked me why I wouldn’t work on my dictionary in the monastery. They’re foreigners, but they understand me better than my own compatriots.”²⁵

On occasion, Ben-Yehuda’s obsession not only clouds his moral judgment but also takes a rather grotesque form. For example, when his mother arrives from Russia he refuses to talk to her because “‘In Eretz Israel I only speak Hebrew!’ he said. ‘I’m very sorry. If you want to talk to me, you’ll have to learn Hebrew.’ Tears were of no avail. On the long journey from Jaffa to Jerusalem her son ignored her and turned his ear away from her.”²⁶

Omer does not suffice with indirect depictions of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda via his actions, but frequently adduces Ben-Zion’s commentary, thereby encouraging the reader to criticize Eliezer and his decisions. Thus, for example, when he hesitates whether to turn to a non-Hebrew-speaking midwife, Omer cites Ben-Zion’s shocked response: “What is he thinking about at a time like this!”²⁷

By relating the events from the perspective of the victim's critical voice the book succeeds in undermining the positive view of the national enterprise, and articulates a non-establishment view. This subversion is also evident in *Divers Onward!*, which tells the story of Taboul-Shahar, a Moroccan immigrant who flees his father's house in order to realize his dreams of making aliya and becoming a diver. Having experienced the vicissitudes of absorption on a kibbutz, he decides that he will serve in the army. On the day of his induction to the IDF, he changes his name to the Israeli name Shahar, and is sent to the elite Underwater Special Missions unit. He completes the course successfully, eventually becomes commander of the unit, and marries his Ashkenazi kibbutz girlfriend.²⁸ The final section of the book describes the military operation in which Taboul-Shahar takes part during the Six-Day War, his capture by the Egyptians, and his escape—for which he receives a medal of honor.

This novel served as a setting for Omer to present her readers with a story to which children had not yet been exposed—the theme of Mizrahi immigrant absorption, written from the immigrant's own perspective. By explicitly referring to the pejorative name for Moroccan immigrants (Moroccan knife), Omer opened the way for a discussion of ethnic discrimination, a subject that had previously been taboo in Israeli children's and young adult literature.²⁹

In order to persuade her readers that Taboul-Shahar was a new type of protagonist intended to replace the sabra (native-born Israeli), Omer created Uri, whose name, physical features, and behavior all indicate his representative role in the book. Although he is strong, smart, outgoing, and a leader, as the plot evolves, it transpires that, like a true sabra, Uri, "really wasn't like he appeared on the outside". In this case, Uri turns out to be a liar, exaggerator, and cruel dolphin-hunter, whose actions put the rest of the unit at risk.³⁰ Not willing to submit to the sabra code of covering for each other, Taboul-Shahar reports Uri to his commander, leading to the latter's dismissal from the unit. The Moroccan immigrant, and the values he brings, represents a new form of Israeliness.

Omer's treatment of Jewish-Arab relations prior and subsequent to the 1948 war in *The Border in the Heart* (1973) constitutes another example of an attempt to undermine the consensual view presented within children's literature. Here, Omer depicts the Arab expulsion from the country in 1948, a theme usually ignored in mainstream Israeli children's literature:

In the night, the city of BeitShe'an was captured by our forces and the next morning a convoy of Arab refugees from the city passed by the kibbutz on

their way to Jordan. I saw the mothers carrying their children, bundles on their backs and the fear of war in their eyes. Very slowly, this large, sad convoy made its way . . .³¹

These examples demonstrate Omer's innovative spirit, boldness, and willingness to broaden the boundaries of the stories told by children's writers. The subjects in which she engaged not only enlarged the scope of children's literature, but also marked the borders that works seeking hegemonic legitimacy were unable to cross.

FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTER

Despite her efforts to give the peripheral voice representation in her works, Omer's devotion to marginal figures is nonetheless limited, and it is ultimately overridden by that which sought to justify the hegemonic perspective. This is facilitated, *inter alia*, by the fact that she crafted her novels as "novel of education", in which the protagonists undergo a process of socialization in which they shed the features that mark their marginality and surrender their own perspective. Thus, for example, Ben-Zion, who finds it difficult to come to terms with his father's hard-heartedness, finally acknowledges the significance of Eliezer's life's work, and ultimately consents to continue his father's great enterprise. In the final conversation between father and son, just before Ben-Zion leaves to study in France, Omer undercuts the alternative view of the historical events the book has related by having Ben-Zion tell Eliezer:

Mom once told me that the day would come when I would be proud of being the guinea-pig in this struggle. True, it hasn't been easy. Sometimes, I really hated you for what you demanded of me and the harsh way you treated me. But today I understand that if you had been softer and given in, you might not have succeeded in your task.³²

Omer's other protagonists similarly admit their "mistakes" and accept the "proper" hegemonic set of values, resigning themselves to the role and place assigned to them in society. The surrender of the alternative view is particularly striking when undertaken voluntarily, an act Omer frequently portrays as being part of the pseudo-"natural" process of maturation or the abandonment of childish egocentrism and narcissism. Thus, while Taboul-Shahar is the narrator in *Divers Onward!*—not an obvious step

in the literary-cultural milieu of the Israeli of the 1960s—he recounts the events retrospectively, thereby distinguishing the Taboul who experiences the events from the Shahar who relates them. Thus, his memories no longer belong to a Mizrahi immigrant but, instead, to a “proper Israeli”. The immigration experience therefore undergoes a double filtering, via Shahar’s retrospective observation and the author’s own viewpoint. In this way, Omer continually erases the critical and provocative potential of the Mizrahi immigrant perspective, but instantly replacing it with that of the Ashkenazi. When Taboul-Shahar recounts how the sabra children on the kibbutz laughed at his Moroccan name, he says:

Apparently I really was a foreigner, different, other, and they got a kick out of this. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so sensitive. A sense of humor might have helped me fit in more. But I was a sixteen-and-a-half-year-old boy—very sensitive and lonely to the point of tears. I swallowed the insults, which quickly turned into a deep sense of inferiority. I was awfully upset about every slight—or what appeared to me then to be a slight—to my dignity. I responded with swears and curses . . . I gave blows without mercy. A great bitterness and anger consumed me. “He’s a criminal!,” they said, “A Moroccan knife.”³³

This passage suggests that the immigrant himself was responsible both for the slurs and for the unpleasant aspects of his absorption. The sabra kids simply were looking for some fun, and it was Taboul-Shahar’s over sensitivity and cultural misunderstanding that prevented him from acknowledging that they were merely sharing a laugh. This insight is only gained when Taboul-Shahar has matured—when he relates the incident “now after many years had passed”.³⁴

The annulment of the angry, critical, and condemnatory view of the Mizrahi immigrant is also evident in the continuation of the story. Taboul-Shahar’s inability to make friends on the diving course, for instance, is presented as being due to his own hostility and introverted nature. Taboul-Shahar himself, on the other hand, regards himself as the victim of ethnic discrimination, responding to his commander’s announcement that he is on the brink of dismissal for “social” reasons with a violent outburst:

“Social problems?” I cried with fury. “I don’t fit in, is that it? They’re all Tnuva children, from kibbutzim, moshavim, good homes, is that it? The children of IDF officers. And me? I’m a Moroccan knife. That’s who I am? . . . A ‘Moroccan knife’ shouldn’t eat *shamenet* and banana, is that it?”³⁵

Yiftah, the unit's Ashkenazi commander, refuses to accept this attitude, however, and reminds Taboul-Shahar of the numerous fights in which he has been involved, and to this Taboul-Shahar replies: "OK, so I'm a bit hotheaded."³⁶ Thus, Taboul-Shahar accepts the interpretation of his Ashkenazi commander. Here, too, Omer negates the immigrant's rage at not being able to find a route to the center of Israeli society, and the feeling of being discriminated against. In order to remain in the diving course, Taboul-Shahar has to find a way to fit in. He must thus stop being angry and self-centered and above all, he has to understand that he himself is responsible for the violent reputation he has gained. Omer strips the Mizrahi immigrant perspective of its censorious dimension by suggesting that Taboul-Shahar's sense of discrimination and deprivation are a figment of his imagination.

It is not coincidental that a book written in Israel after the Six-Day War presents the army as the principal agent of both assimilation and masculinity, since it forms a prime agent of the Israeli "melting pot" and military service is the epitome of cultural assimilation.³⁷ Taboul-Shahar's escape from captivity due to his knowledge of Arabic represents the final test of his acceptance into Israeli society. This gain comes at the price of relinquishing his Arab identity, however, which he must renounce if he is to be regarded as "one of ours" rather than "one of theirs".³⁸ The novel thus clearly presents the vision of a liberal, post-socialist society based on equality and the male brotherhood of soldiers.

Rama, the protagonist of *Flying High*, experiences a similar transition from the periphery to the center. Born in Yemen and arriving in Israel at the age of four as part of "Operation Magic Carpet",³⁹ Rama's experience serves as an example of the Israeli "melting pot" and the assimilation of Mizrahi immigrants into the country. *Flying High* strongly recalls the Cinderella story, as Rama is a poor girl from the social margins who marries a pilot—a prestigious profession in Israeli society—and is accepted into the pre-1967 Ashkenazi bourgeoisie. In contrast to Taboul-Shahar, who is full of anger towards what he regards as ethnic discrimination, Rama feels inferior to the Ashkenazi women. While she attributes the difficulties she encounters in the stewardess course to her ethnic background and class, it transpires that, like Taboul-Shahar, she has a distorted view of reality. On the course, she meets the blond Keren, who appears to be the personification of the rich, spoiled Ashkenazi girl with good "connections".⁴⁰ To her surprise, however, Keren turns out to be an immigrant from Romania, a survivor of the Holocaust, and a desolate orphan who, in order to complete

the course, requires Rama's help. Rama thus understands that European immigrants also face problems in assimilating into Israeli society; and their situation perhaps being even more difficult. This circumstance exemplifies the book's central theme—that Israeli society enables social mobility by ignoring ethnic and class background and regarding success as a matter of personality and effort.

Unlike Keren, however, Rama has come from a non-modernized country. For example, on her way to Israel she had attempted to light a fire on the floor of the plane in order to boil coffee. Thus, Rama must learn new ways of living, and first of all learn how to use make-up and dress properly. She fights against the antiquated views of her parents, whose aliya experience has been, in Rama's words, "a leap through centuries of culture".⁴¹ After visiting Europe, Rama finally becomes a sophisticated, modern Western woman. Her assimilation into Israeli society, however, is complete only after she experiences the Six-Day War and perseveres when her pilot husband is wounded in a terrorist attack on El Al planes. As in *Divers Onward!*, the Six-Day War is, here too, presented as the formative Israeli event in the lives of Mizrahi immigrants.

In *I'll Overcome*, Gila, the disabled heroine, undergoes a similar experience. Her disability drives her to the margins of society, and her voice is heard only retrospectively. Although the novel intimates that people with disabilities can succeed in life, it also clearly signifies the social boundaries that cannot be crossed. In the wake of two failed romances with non-disabled boys, and having discovered that she is not attracted to people with disabilities, Gila comes to terms with the fact that she "must live her life without a man's love, a family, or children."⁴² Omer presents this realization as a reasonable and warranted conclusion, as Gila says, "I looked for emotional and physical fullness in love. But what right did I have to seek from others what I myself don't have?"⁴³

The book portrays intimacy only between people who are both either disabled or non-disabled. Gila decides that she must seek contentment outside family life, training to work with children who have disabilities. She decides to study psychology in order to help others. Despite overcoming the punches life has thrown at her and adopting the mottoes "I can" and "I'll overcome", Gila acknowledges her marginal place as a woman with disabilities. She is restricted to living among other people with disabilities and working in a caring profession. In this story, the protagonist's hope of reaching the center of Israeli society is doomed to failure, and an integral part of her maturation consists of accepting that fact.

Despite the boldness of Omer's depiction of the Arab expulsion in *The Border in the Heart*, here, too, the narrator's compassion fails to override her boyfriend's view: "It wasn't us who wanted this war . . . they started it."⁴⁴ This book, in fact, appears to serve as a seal of approval of Israel's dealings with her Arab neighbors.⁴⁵

Omer's tendency to favor the hegemonic voice over the potential existence of other voices in the narrative is perhaps most clearly evident in her historical novels, in which the protagonists' lives are intertwined with that of the Zionist enterprise or the State's struggle to survive. However it is also manifest in her social fiction. For example, Taboul-Shahar finally becomes an Israeli, thanks to the Six-Day War, and the shedding of his Moroccan past takes place simultaneously with Israel's victory over her Arab neighbors. Similarly, the story of Rama in *Flying High* is interwoven with the history of El Al, the Israeli national airline.⁴⁶ Rama is brought to Israel from Yemen on an El Al plane, lives near the airport, falls in love with a pilot, becomes a stewardess and then an El Al pilot's wife, and her husband is eventually injured in a terror attack. Her life as a modern, "progressive" Israeli woman clearly parallels the development of the national air carrier on its way to becoming a large, developed company. Like Rama, who is left to cope alone with her children against the threat of war on the front, El Al takes this opportunity to prove its independence. By integrating her protagonists with the unifying process and linking their stories with that of the State, Omer confirms the narrative's legitimacy and consensual nature. She creates a story that carries the potential of representing a heterogenic society that embraces adversity that is never realized.

CONCLUSION

The article demonstrates the structure of Omer's fiction. Omer's novels portray the process by which the protagonists, who come from the social periphery, become part of the center. Although they depict an alternative perspective, as the plot progresses this critical voice gradually fades away, and the protagonists assume the mantle of the hegemonic culture they had originally opposed. The conflict between the critical and hegemonic voices exemplifies the tension between the trend towards individualism and democracy—which promoted heterogeneity, criticism, and a civil ethos—and the unifying sense of homogeneous collective identity that sought to strengthen the national ethos that marked the Israeli society of the 1960s and '70s.

Omer's novels set before Israeli society a mirror that not only reflected a beautified self-image, but also bridged and blurred its ideological tensions. Israeli society could therefore simultaneously, and without contradiction, identify itself as liberal, heterogeneous, and equal, but also as unified and hegemonic. This duality of Omer's work saved it from becoming superficial, authoritarian, and propagandist, and enabled it to represent the multi-dimensional and conflicted Israeli society of the 1960s and '70s.

NOTES

1. The translations of the titles of Omer's books and the citations are my own. The year of publication and page numbers refer to the Hebrew editions.

2. Shoshana Shadmi and Hanna Kokhba, "What do Sixth Graders Read?" *Ma'agelei Qriya* 3 (1977): 41–7 [Hebrew].

3. *Hadashot*, 9 May 1989, 2 [Hebrew].

4. *Hatzofe*, 7 April 1998, 6 [Hebrew].

5. Sarit Ishai-Levy, "Income Tax Attests," *Hadashot*, 12 June 1987, 54–5 [Hebrew].

6. For Omer's early writing and "Tamar's Pages", see Rima Shikhmanter, *Paper Friends: Children's Periodicals in Israel, 1948–1958* (Jerusalem, 2014) [Hebrew].

7. These books were published in English, respectively, as *The Gideonites: The Story of "NILI" Spies in the Middle East* (New York, 1968) and *Rebirth: The Story of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and the Modern Hebrew Language* (Philadelphia, 1972).

8. For the changes that took place in Israeli society during the 1950s and the '60s see for example, Amir Ben-Porat, *The Bourgeoisie: The History of the Israeli Bourgeoisie* (Jerusalem, 1999), 157–67 [Hebrew]; Eliezer Don-Yehiya, "Public Policy and Management of Major Political Cleavages," in *Public Policy in Israel: Perception and Practices*, ed. Dani Koren (Lanham, MA, 2005), 9–30; Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, *Troubles in Utopia: The Overburdened Polity of Israel* (New York, 1989); Anita Shapira, *Israel: A History* (Waltham, MA, 2012), 155–293; Uri Ram, ed., *Israeli Society: Critical Perspectives* (Tel-Aviv, 1993) [Hebrew]; Jonathan Shapira, *Israeli Democracy* (Ramat Gan, 1977) [Hebrew]; Zvi Zameret and Hanna Yablunka, eds., *The Second Decade, 1958–1968* (Jerusalem, 2000) [Hebrew].

9. Zohar Shavit, "Hebrew and Israeli Children's Literature," in *Companion Encyclopedia*, ed. Peter Hunt (London, 1996), 782–8.

10. Shikhmanter, *Paper Friends*.

11. Osnat Gabayan, "Telling Story in Four Voices" (PhD diss., Tel-Aviv University, 2011) [Hebrew].

12. Dana Keren-Yaar, *Authoresses Write for Children: Postcolonial and Feminist Readings in Hebrew Children's Literature* (Tel-Aviv, 2007), 157 [Hebrew]; Dorit Shilo, "In the Service of the Nation: Israeli Women Authors Writing for Children: The

Historical Novels of Devora Omer” (paper presented at the conference “Women’s Literature and the Establishment of a Nation”, Napoli, 1–3 April 2009); Gabayan, “Telling Story in Four Voices.”

13. Yael Darr, *A Canon of many Voices: Forming a Labor Movement Canon for Children, 1930–1950* (Jerusalem, 2013) [Hebrew].

14. Hannan Hever’s claim that Israeli literature does not expunge the Other but rather presents the process of his dissolution is also relevant in this context: Hannan Hever, “A Map of Sand: From Hebrew Literature to Israeli Literature,” *Theory and Criticism* 20 (2002): 165–90 [Hebrew].

15. *Divers Onward!* was published in English as *Path Beneath the Sea* (New York, 1969).

16. See Billie Melman, “The Legend of Sarah: Gender, Memory and National Identities: Eretz Yisrael, 1917–1990,” *Zion* 65,3 (2000): 348–57 [Hebrew].

17. As Gershon Shaked notes, the turning away from mainstream figures towards the periphery of Israeli society was typical of many contemporary Israeli authors: Gershon Shaked, “From the Sea?—The Portrayal of the Hero in Hebrew Narrative from the 1940s to the Present Day,” *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 9 (1986): 7–22; Cf. Avner Holtzman, “Israeli Literature in the Second Decade of the State,” in *Love of Zion: Studies in Modern Hebrew Literature* (Jerusalem, 2006), 503 [both in Hebrew].

18. Omer returns to this theme again and again in her historical fiction. See, for example, her biographical novels: *A Voice Called in the Dark* (the story of Theodor Herzl) (Tel-Aviv, 1980), *To the Top of the Hill: The Story of David Ben-Gurion* (Tel-Aviv, 1984), and *In Haste* (the story of Manya Shohat) (Jerusalem, 1989) [all in Hebrew].

19. During his adolescence Ben-Zion changed his name to Itamar.

20. Itamar Ben-Avi, *Memories of the First Hebrew Child* (Jerusalem, 1961), 3–11 [Hebrew].

21. For the representation of the pioneer (*halutz*) in Yishuv children’s literature, see Tmira Arbel, “‘Always Start All Over Again’: The Pioneer in Eliezer Smolli’s ‘Anshei Bereshit’,” *Olam Katan* 1 (2000): 140–50 [Hebrew].

22. Devorah Omer, *Ben-Yehuda’s Eldest Son* (Tel-Aviv, 1967), 8.

23. *Ibid.*, 31.

24. *Ibid.*, 60.

25. *Ibid.*, 61.

26. *Ibid.*, 82.

27. *Ibid.*, 60.

28. The Yemenite immigrant Rama, in *Flying High*, also married an Ashkenazi—an act symbolizing both the protagonist’s assimilation within Israeli modern society and an optimistic view of the possibility of bridging the ethnical gap. Cf. Shohat Ella, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin, TX, 1989), 120.

29. The only young adult book to directly address the issue of discrimination

towards Mizrahi immigrants and voice criticism of the absorption establishment as early as the 1970s was Sammy Michael's *Shacks and Dreams* (Tel-Aviv, 1978) [Hebrew].

30. Devorah Omer, *Divers Onward!* (Tel-Aviv, 1967), 94.

31. Devorah Omer, *The Border in the Heart* (Tel-Aviv, 1973), 71.

32. Omer, *Ben-Yehuda's Eldest Son*, 126.

33. Omer, *Divers Onward!*, 25–6.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 75. Tnuva is one of the largest dairy companies in Israel, the phrase “*shamenet* and banana” denote a wealthy childhood.

36. *Idem.*

37. Yagil Levy, *The Other Army in Israel: Materialist Militarism in Israel* (Tel-Aviv, 2003), 63–4 [Hebrew]. Levy describes the historical-economic process that made it possible for the Mizrahi immigrants to achieve senior positions in the army during the 1970s (100–7). Omer described this development much earlier, in the late 1960s.

38. Cf. the protagonist of Sammy Michael's *All Men are Equal—But Some More So* (Tel-Aviv, 1976) [Hebrew], who experiences a similar situation. While Michael's character retains his Arab identity to the end, however, Taboul-Shahar's identity is completely unambivalent. For an analysis of this episode in Michael's novel, see Shimrit Peled, “*Mizrahiut, Ashkenaziut, and Space in the Israeli Novel after the 1967 War*,” *Theory and Criticism* 29 (2006):157–60 [Hebrew].

39. A mission undertaken in 1949–50 to bring 50, 000 Yemenite Jews to Israel.

40. Omer, *Flying High*, 119.

41. *Ibid.*, 42.

42. Devorah Omer, *I'll Overcome* (Tel-Aviv, 1970), 134.

43. *Ibid.*, 136.

44. Omer, *The Border in the Heart*, 72.

45. The novel was published before the Yom Kippur War rather than in its wake. Moreover, it precludes any real scrutiny of the suffering of the “other side”, the narrator's viewpoint not representing a political but a compassionate feminine alternative. At the same time, this perspective itself was unique in its time—and in general: see Keren-Yaar, *Authoresses Write for Children*, 164–5.

46. El Al signifies “to the above/skies” in Hebrew.