

***BORDERS, TERRITORIES, AND ETHICS: HEBREW LITERATURE  
IN THE SHADOW OF THE INTIFADA*** by Adia Mendelson-Maoz.  
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This wide-ranging study by Adia Mendelson-Maoz addresses the changes that took place in Israeli fiction during the two decades after the outbreak of the First Intifada, in 1987. Mendelson-Maoz employs a variety of theoretical paradigms to categorize the texts she considers, and to unpack their implications. Her primary conceptual concerns emerge from discussions of borders and ethics. Deleuze and Guattari's notions of deterritorialization underpin many of the analyses throughout the study. In addition, Mendelson-Maoz draws upon the American philosopher Thomas Nagel's writings on "moral luck," and Emmanuel Levinas' ethical framework regarding the face of the Other, in order "to show the power of literary texts to reveal problematic situations and encourage a new ethical gaze."

*Borders, Territories, and Ethics* covers an impressive range of works, mostly novels. The book discusses canonical authors who have been widely translated, such as A.B. Yehoshua and Orly Castel-Bloom, and lesser-known writers whose works are (as yet) not available in English, such as Dror Green's *The Intifada Tales* (1989) and Asher Kravitz's *I, Mustafa Rabinovitch* (2004). The first half of the book deals with direct forms of armed conflict in the Occupied Territories. Mendelson-Maoz argues that the Intifadas brought about an historical shift in literary discourses surrounding the Israeli soldier. She also summarizes a number of ethical dilemmas regarding Israeli writers' representation of Palestinians' experience under Occupation (even in its omission from certain narratives). Her study is keenly sensitive to openings for ethical critiques, exposing both lapses and opportunities for ethically-situated readings in texts that other readers might easily overlook or simplify. The second half of the book addresses the portrayal of Israel's national mythology of bereavement with respect to both soldier-combatants and victims of terror.

Mendelson-Maoz situates her own analyses within highly contextualized

scholarly debates on issues such as the phenomenon of “shooting and crying” (*yorim u-vokhim*), the role of sacrificial myths in Israeli collective consciousness (primarily, the “binding of Isaac”/*aqeda*), and the ethical potential of postmodern, feminist, and “nomadic” forms of writing. The book clearly and succinctly maps out literary-critical perspectives on these issues, while dealing in detail with almost two dozen works of fiction. Given the immense amount of material surveyed alone, the book offers a great resource for other scholars and educators. But Mendelson-Maoz’s ambition is to probe deeper, exploring how “the geographic abnormality of a state without stable borders is both a reality and a metaphor for confusion, contradiction, fear, and aggression.” And her book mostly succeeds in explicating these considerations, as well. Each of the early chapters strikes a different balance between the large amount of literary material and the original arguments that Mendelson-Maoz contributes to weighty ethical, spatial, and literary-historical debates. The second half of the book is more streamlined, as Mendelson-Maoz continues to synthesize what “deterritorialization” offers to readings Israel’s border(lessness) and the Occupation.

The first two chapters discuss no less than ten works (novels and short stories) in terms of the ethical “twilight zone” that the Occupation presents to Israel’s citizens, soldiers, and self-conception. Most of the texts presented in these chapters were published in the early years of the new millennium, though their narratives depict events going back to the mid-1980s. Mendelson-Maoz draws on the “spatial turn” in Israeli literary criticism, and in particular on the works of Karen Grumberg and Hannan Hever, while also using various “border studies,” such as those by Eyal Weizman, Adi Ophir and Ariella Azoulay, to frame her own discussions. She focuses first on the rooftops that Israeli soldiers appropriate from private Palestinian residences in the course of military operations in the Occupied Territories, a situation depicted in quite a number of novels and stories. While rooftops apparently offer a tactical (visual) advantage, Mendelson-Maoz argues that “the roof does not provide protection or guarantee victory” insofar as it exposes the contradictory “dual morality” under which Israeli soldiers operate.

Perhaps implicitly pushing back against the recent trend that shifts the emphasis of critique from Israel’s post-1967 order to 1948, Mendelson-Maoz suggests that the lack of fixed borders around the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 have undermined the very function of the border as an

institution of sovereignty. As a result, the West Bank and Gaza were never successfully appropriated to the Jewish national narrative (and therefore, to the Israeli national space) in the same manner as the territory within the state's pre-'67 borders. For this reason, even as the military continually seeks to take control over various locations across the Occupied Territories, individual Israeli soldiers find themselves encountering a "foreign and strange" space, which produces a number of "de-territorializing" effects. Mendelson-Maoz points to changes in the figure of the Israeli soldier, from a "hero" acting in defense of the state in the early decades of the state, to a "perpetrator" carrying out questionable (or indefensible) acts that contradict the humanistic moral strain in Zionism's self-definition. Taking over the space of a private family's roof, in many cases, is part of a series of actions that in fact destabilize the Zionist narrative, which holds that its soldiers are moral and fight only in self-defense. The social pressures of soldiering, strongly informed by hyper-masculine demonstrations of sexualized violence and animalism, debase the very humanist ethos that is central to the subject formation of Israeli youth. And yet, despite the gross abuses and moral corruption portrayed in the texts Mendelson-Maoz discusses, some of these narratives ultimately uphold the national myth of the soldier as a conscientious subject, at once a "perpetrator and victim."

These analyses inevitably lead to debates over the "shooting and crying" feature of many narratives, both fictional and testimonial, about Israeli soldiers. Mendelson-Maoz traces this discourse back to S. Yizhar's fiction in 1948, and to the post-1967 non-fiction work *The Seventh Day*. She considers the value of focusing on soldiers' moral dilemmas, situating the second chapter within a recent debate between Slavoj Žižek and Gil Hochberg over whether there is a meaningful distinction between soldiers and non-combatants. As Hochberg asks regarding soldiers, "Are we to assume they are categorically different from 'us' or that their crimes are ones that we 'ordinary people' would have not committed under similar circumstances?" Mendelson-Maoz brings the concept of "moral luck" to this debate, a notion she adopts from Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* (1986). By considering situations where subjects are not in control of a given situation (such as how the Israeli military places its conscripts in the Occupation), yet remain responsible for individual choices, Mendelson-Maoz argues that "moral luck ... defines the perpetrator-victim pathology of the Israeli soldier very well."

Mendelson-Maoz's third chapter shifts to works that portray the Occupation from Palestinian perspectives. Here again, she draws a contrast with portrayals of Palestinian citizens of Israel in its pre-1967 borders (Yehoshua's *The Lover*, 1977, and Kaniuk's *Confessions of a Good Arab*, 1984) and Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories. For the latter scenario, Mendelson-Maoz examines three novels, David Grossman's *Smile of the Lamb* (1983), Itamar Levy's *Letters of the Sun, Letters of the Moon* (1991), and Green's *Intifada Tales*. The texts that take place in Israel proper, she argues, dealt primarily with the Palestinian-Israeli subject position in relation to Jewish-Israeli culture, focusing on issues such as assimilation and cultural hegemony. In contrast, the latter trio of works aim to destabilize the Israeli-Jewish framework – not only by adopting a Palestinian perspective, but also through formal experimentation, from non-linear narratives to the use of legends, folktales, the grotesque, and a preference for the fantastic over the realist mode. Mendelson-Maoz addresses sub-altern critiques of cultural appropriation and Orientalism in these novels. But she ultimately concludes that the authors' stylistic experiments are of a piece with their postmodern contemporaries, such as Castel-Bloom and Etgar Keret (who do not make use of Arabic folktales). All of these authors aim to highlight the abjection of Palestinian life, and its shrinking space under Occupation, by promoting disorientation and instability of meaning, emphasizing the grotesque aspects of mimicry and hybridity, and re-imagining Jewish-Israeli motifs like the "living-dead" through Palestinian figures. In short, she argues, these texts produce a subversive form of deterritorialization.

Mendelson-Maoz's readings here are largely convincing, and also wide-ranging enough to encompass valid counterarguments. But if the virtue of these chapters is their extensive coverage, at times they are also spread thin for the same reason. Moving quickly between so many works, it is at times unclear where Mendelson-Maoz intends to base her critiques. Her study, however, shifts focus considerably in the remaining chapters, which deal mostly with texts from the Second Intifada and center more on the experience of Israeli Jewish civilians. In the fourth chapter, Mendelson-Maoz reads Yehoshua's *Friendly Fire* (2007) against nearly his entire oeuvre. She concludes that *Friendly Fire* marks a major moderation of Yehoshua's previously scathing criticism of the myth of the bereaved father (which derived from his moral rejection of the *aqeda* myth). Mendelson-Maoz

believes that this change stems from what many critics, including Hever, cite as the watering down of Yehoshua's leftist politics through literary endorsements of Zionist master narratives. Though substantiated in detail, this chapter seems to diverge from a focus on the Intifadas themselves to a focus on the latest iteration of the "intergenerational struggle" – a preoccupation of Israeli literary criticism.

The fifth chapter addresses the changes in Orly Castel-Bloom's fiction over a narrower period, from Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City* (1992) to *Human Parts* (2002), reflecting the two intifadas, respectively. Mendelson-Maoz argues that *Dolly City* "deterritorializes the Zionist space" through the titular protagonist's grotesque operations on the human body and hyper-literal representations of ideology; in all, the novel "voices virulent criticism during a critical time in the nation's history." *Human Parts*, by contrast, "reveals changes in national temperament" during the Second Intifada by emphasizing "confusion and passivity." Mendelson-Maoz suggests a parallel to *Friendly Fire* and Yehoshua's non-fiction, in which the violent collapse of the peace process resulted in a weakened critical impulse across society. Yet for Castel-Bloom, dramatizing this very disillusionment, awash in televisual media and superficial national solidarity, is itself a form of critique.

Mendelson-Maoz finds more promising ethical possibilities in the works covered by her final two chapters: Yehoshua's *A Woman in Jerusalem* and Shifra Horn's *Ode to Joy*, both from 2004, as well as Michal Govrin's *Snapshots* (2002) and Ronit Matalon's *Bliss* (2000). In these cases, Mendelson-Maoz looks to the literary text as "a source of ethical insights." The protagonists of *A Woman in Jerusalem* and *Ode to Joy* are drawn into unexpected journeys launched out of an obligation to victims killed in terror attacks. Importantly, in these novels, the victims are utter strangers to the protagonists. Through a lengthy exposition of Levinas' ethics, Mendelson-Maoz interprets the defining act in these novels as "leaving a known space and entering unknown territories to understand and develop responsibility for the Other." Stylistically, the restrained prose of *A Woman in Jerusalem*, which follows a human resources manager as he accompanies a coffin bearing an anonymous contract worker back to her native Romania, is Yehoshua's most ethically radical text.

In both form and content, Govrin and Matalon's novels articulate feminist critiques that undermine territorial sovereignty, according to Mendelson-

Maoz. The protagonists of these novels are women who live and travel outside of Israel, while also transgressing normative national boundaries in their romantic attachments (including in affairs with Palestinian men). Mendelson-Maoz adopts another framework from Deleuze and Guattari, emphasizing the “rhizomatic” shape of these narratives, which emerges from their non-linear, fragmented structures and “the female protagonists [who] wander within spaces, creating a mode of nomadic existence in their journeys, their love lives, and their art.” And yet, in these novels, this “female and ethical perspective is crushed and threatened with violence”, revealing a “realistic view” of the fate that currently awaits such radical approaches to family, borders, territory, and sovereignty.

Throughout this impressive study, Mendelson-Maoz posits that Israeli authors establish and contest national values. For Hebrew literature, the intifadas marked a new chapter in longstanding intergenerational debates about the morality of the Israeli military, the location and stability of Israel’s borders, and the ethical justification of Zionism itself. The ethical terrain upon which these issues are contested, however, seems to have been remapped by the unprecedented proximity to violent death that characterized the Second Intifada. Furthermore, the enduring lack of a clear distinction between Israeli sovereignty and Occupation perpetuates an extreme form of deterritorialization, one that, in Matalon and Govrin’s novels, can “enable flexibility in the subject’s never-ending becoming,” but that, more often, returns the Jewish-Israeli collective to a perceived existential struggle to survive, filled with destabilizing encounters that contravene the humanist ethos of the Zionist tradition. Out of this dizzying reality, *Borders, Territories, and Ethics* offers a number of useful theoretical frameworks for understanding a period whose fundamental contradictions remain unresolved.