



**Adia Mendelson-Maoz**, *Borders, Territories, and Ethics: Hebrew Literature in the Shadow of the Intifada* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2018), 252 pp. Paperback, \$30.00. Kindle, \$26.00.

*Borders, Territories, and Ethics* posits contemporary Hebrew literature as a mouthpiece for Israeli ambivalence over its occupation of Palestinian territories. Analyzing a diverse group of Hebrew literary texts authored by writers ranging from A. B. Yehoshua to Ronit Matalon, Adia Mendelson-Maoz approaches the ethics of spatial appropriation from a literary perspective. In her own words, “this book offers a spatial reading of contemporary Israeli literature written in the shadow of the intifada. Although it is part of what can be termed the spatial turn in the research on Israeli literature, my reading takes a distinctive philosophical perspective” (x).

Focused on Hebrew novels and short stories written between 1987 and 2007 and building on a spatial discourse established by a generation of Hebrew literary critics comprising scholars such as Karen Grumberg, Yaron Peleg, and Hannan Hever, Mendelson-Maoz weaves detailed analyses of fictional texts with philosophical discussions. Mendelson-Maoz argues that her book “aims to show the power of literary texts to reveal problematic situations and encourage a new ethical gaze” (xvii). She reflects on the role of art within the contemporary Israeli environment in a brief preface to the second part of the book where she meditates on the question of “Does Literature Matter?” In it, she analyzes the differences between the first and the second intifadas in terms of their relationship to the daily lives of ordinary Israelis and suggests that literature has taken on the role of helping the Israeli public navigate its own shift away from hopes for peace. With the notable exception of S. Yizhar (in *Hirbet Hizze*, for example), writers, she claims, did not really start addressing the ethical implications of the Naqba or the occupation until the first intifada, which “thrust this twilight zone into broader Israeli society in a dramatic and tangible way” because of the fact that Palestinian civilians were involved and Israelis were hearing for the first time the voices of the inhabitants of the territories (xii).

This experience of recognition was heightened significantly during the second intifada when Palestinians penetrated Israeli cities, unleashing terrorist attacks on buses and in cafes (76). Until that point, the displacement of Palestinians (in 1948) and the occupation of Palestinian lands (in 1967) felt ‘remote’ to most Israelis. The ‘shock’ of the first intifada inspired writers in the 1980s such as David Grossman to reflect on the “large gap” (in Yaron Peleg’s formulation) “between words and actions, between the self-righteousness of Zionism, the magnitude of its hyperbole and its ugly policies toward the Palestinians,” while at the turn of

the twenty-first century the cast of writers engaging with the Palestinian/Israeli conflict in the occupied West Bank had expanded significantly (quoted in Mendelson-Maoz xiii).

How exactly does Mendelson-Maoz link space, ethics, and philosophy in the wake of the two intifadas through close readings of Hebrew fiction? In what follows I can provide just a few examples of the progression of her arguments. In her analysis, for example, of stories that focus on soldiers who are stationed on roofs (Asher Kravitz's *I, Mustafa Rabinovitch* and Shai Lahav's *Go to Gaza*, among others), she discusses the "topographical superiority of the Israeli soldier and the metaphor of the panopticon in which Palestinian villages or camps are monitored by soldiers who know everything about everybody." The deterritorialization of the soldiers represented in the stories discussed is documented in this literature, she argues, with an eye toward the grotesque, theorized by Homi Bhabha in his work on colonialism, thus providing a "counter-movement" against the space of occupation (12).

In her discussion of an argument between Gil Hochberg and Slavoj Žižek over whether or not Israeli literature is justified in "humanizing" the aggressor, or calling soldiers "ordinary" people, Mendelson-Maoz analyzes stories such as Yitzhak Ben Ner's *Delusion*, Roy Politi's *Roof Rabbits*, and Liran Ron Furer's *Checkpoint Syndrome* through the lens of Thomas Nagel's theory of "moral luck." This theory posits that different individuals are given different opportunities to test their morality in different situations. Israeli soldiers, Mendelson-Maoz points out, are pressed to make ethical judgement calls at very young ages when confronted with a conflict between their conscience and the authorities that ask them to violate that conscience for reasons of national security and even personal safety. They have been placed in a situation that demonstrates the arbitrariness of "moral luck," of being able to avoid these conflicts through accidents of birth or fate, or of being constantly confronted by them, as is the case of Israeli soldiers in the age of intifada.

In a moving Levinasian reading of stories by Shifra Horn and A. B. Yehoshua, Mendelson-Maoz's chapter on "terrorism and the face of the dead other" considers the spatial toll of terrorism insofar as the protagonists from Horn's *Ode to Joy* and Yehoshua's *A Woman in Jerusalem* must each leave their comfort zone, spatially and emotionally, as they follow the tracks of those killed in terrorist attacks, people they did not know before their deaths. In so doing, they take responsibility for seeing the face of the Other and developing a new understanding of morality and ethical obligation.

*Borders, Territories and Ethics* introduced me to an arsenal of themes and ideas that I had never considered in my approach to Hebrew literature.

I was impressed, in particular, with Mendelson-Maoz's reading of Orly Castel-Bloom, Ronit Matalon, and Michal Govrin as writers negotiating Israeli nationalist spaces within a gendered configuration. Castel-Bloom in *Dolly City* reflects on motherhood and its role in the Zionist narrative, and Govrin and Matalon's protagonists "[wander] through spaces, creating a mode of nomadic existence in their journeys, their love lives and their art" (146).

I enjoyed this study immensely, reading every word with pleasure. I did, however, wonder why the author did not dedicate any of her discussion to Palestinian writers of Hebrew literature, such as Anton Shammas or Naim Araidi, who used Hebrew to tell the story of Palestinian experience in part as a way of, in Reuven Snir's words, "rebell[ing] against the exclusive ownership of the Jews over the Hebrew language" (Snir 1995: 164). Both fall into the period under discussion, and it might have been instructive to consider the Hebrew writers of Palestinian descent (even if Araidi is primarily a poet). How do they claim the Hebrew language itself as a kind of cultural space that demands a particular type of ethical approach in the face of the Israeli occupation? How does their bilingualism construct a commentary on their Hebrew commitments within a highly politicized linguistic landscape?

Despite this omission, *Borders, Territories and Ethics* is beautifully constructed and well argued. It provides a blueprint for interested academic and well-informed laypeople alike of readings in contemporary Hebrew literature at a crossroads of politics and ethics.

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## REFERENCES

- Snir, Reuven. 1995. "'Hebrew as the Language of Grace': Arab-Palestinian Writers in Hebrew." Trans. M. Awda and R. Snir. *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 15 (2): 163–183.