A Woman-Centered Examination of the Heroines in the Stories of Amos Oz

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Abstract

The representation of violence against female protagonists in the Oz canon encompasses within its prism manifold ventilations. It often, only becomes apparent as one scratches the surfaces of the author's works to examine the seemingly insignificant deportment, thoughts and observations of secondary characters. The reason being that masculine hostility is frequently veiled as innocuous ruminations by a male character. Until recently, the patriarchal legacy of violence that animates several of Oz's plots and which is inextricably enmeshed in the configuration of female psychology, has been, for the most part, overlooked within the scholarly community. Yet, with the growing attention by feminist criticism to such ideas, the identification of similar themes suffusing Oz's writing is certain to surface and is welcomed addition to this important path.

The myth that women secretly fantasize about being raped, or alternatively, experience sexual pleasure in being raped, overhangs much of misogynous literature. Further, this myth has added to the reservoir of anti-female fallacies that maintain that women covertly desire this sexual violation. Another recurring literary topos resonating thorough male fiction has been the tendency to conjoin female sexuality with the fantasy of rape.

Andrea Dworkin writes that a traditional patriarchal fantasy, reflected in male-authored narratives portraying rape is: "Men have always known it, that women not only need, but want it. Rape. It was always obvious to them, a woman's virtue is merely a facade, and her reluctance is merely a tactic. (1974: 86). Beatrice Faust explains this perennial myth: "Men's general inability to understand that sex does not occupy the same in female imagination as it does in male leads some of them to assume that women dream about rape, secretly want it... men's proclivity for sexual fantasy leads them to project their own hopes, needs and wants on to women: Women do not want it', but men want to imagine they do." (1980: 121-122).

This essay will argue that this familiar staple looms large in several of Amos Oz's early short stories of the 1960's and novels written in the 1980's and 1990's. It will also maintain that hand in hand with the fantasy of rape motif, one can find sequences of violence by men against women in the Oz corpus that is commensurate with the patriarchal modulation that permeate the textual patina of some of Oz's tales. The essay deploys the stance of a resisting reader, seeking to offer a reassessment of several Oz texts through feminist filters and lenses.

The 'fantasy of rape' theme is most obtrusive in My Michael (Oz 1991) the author's magnum opus and the work that brought him international recognition. In it, Oz has his central female character, Hanna Gonen, not only daydreaming about being raped, but more importantly, experiencing enjoyment through it. Although the leitmotif of rape is foregrounded in the heroine's imaginary world, one must not permit this literary artifice to obscure the violence transmitted in the narrative. In the words of Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver:

...the act of rereading rape...requires restoring rape to the literal, to the body: restoring, that is, the violence-the physical sexual violation. The insistence on taking rape literally often necessitates a conscious critical act of reading the violence and the sexuality back into texts where it has been deflected, either by the text itself or by the critics: where it has been turned into a metaphor or a symbol... (1991: 4).

Another factor, which masks the rape motif, is the structure of the narrative. As the story is written in the first-person narrative, with Hanna both its narrator and chronicler, the reader is positioned to see her world and fantasies as those representing an authentic female voice and mind. Judith Fetterley, who urged readers to resist masculine narrative points of view, explains the effect this conformation has on the female consciousness: "In such fiction the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a self-hood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself." (1978: xxi)

Pam Morris agrees, "The construction of narrative point of view is one of the most powerful means by which readers are imperceptibly brought to share the values of the text." (1993: 8). In My Michael, the reader is interpellated to adopt and comply with the viewpoint and the gender driven stereotypes, which the shaping of the plot seeks to present.

The first instance of the rape fantasy occurs two days before Hanna's wedding. Shopping in a market with her future husband Michael for household items, she dreams of being viciously abducted by two Arab twins, Halil and Aziz. After being dragged into a dark cellar, she is violently thrown onto the ground and taunted by her abductors. (36). Incredulously, Hanna is allowed to leave, and thus be spared the imminent violation, but declines to do so, "...He ran past me and opened a door I had not noticed. He pointed to the door and bowed a waiter's bow. I was free. I could leave...I could have left but I didn't." (ibid.) The brutality of the episode is fleshed out when Halil draws out a knife and rapes her (36-37). In addition to her acquiescence to remain after being offered a chance to escape, Hanna also admits of her desire to be rescued by Michael, only however, after the twins complete their assault, "The darkness wanted Michael to come and rescue me only at the end of the pain and pleasure." (my italics.) (ibid.)

Other similar episodes are peppered throughout the narrative. Most are imbued with romantic overtones, and are depicted as the culmination of uncontrollable passion aroused by an excessively libidinal Hanna. In one dream, Hanna describes an encounter between her and a captain, whom she meets at an underwater cavern. The captain, with seething sexual hunger, and a gleam in his eyes, seizes her savagely and rapes her- she in turn willingly eases his lust and passionate hatred (16). Another dream sees her hoping for a faceless perpetrator who has been ambushing her to violently attack her: "...behind convent walls in the village of Ein Kerem a strange man lurking relentlessly lying in wait. Let him come live and snarling hurl me to the ground and thrust into my body and he will growl and I shriek in reply in a rapture of horror and magic of horror and thrill I will scream burn and suck like a vampire..."(161). Further, the heroine's erotic reveries evolve into orgiastic acts--take this example of a multiple rape:
Silently the twins clasped my arms to tie them behind my back. The poet Saul leaned over to intoxicate me with his moustache and his warm odor. Rahamim Rahamimov the handsome taxi driver came too and clasped me round the waist like a wild man...Hands pressed my body. Kneaded. Pounded. Probed. I laughed and screamed with all my strength. Soundlessly. The soldiers thronged and closed round me in their mottled battledress...I was all theirs." (148).

While this and other sequence are presented as part of the heroine's imagination, Moshe Giyora asserts that these dreams may in fact be rooted in reality (1968: 14). He asks: "was it just a dream, or an actual memory, repressed into the unconscious. Many details, hints and expressions scattered throughout the book, instruct us that this was more than just a dream." (16). This interpretation is based on a recollection Hanna has of her Landlady, Mrs. Taranpoler, suggesting that the young people of today marry too quickly. After being told of the dream Hanna has before the wedding, Mrs. Taranpoler construes the dream as wedding jitters of a maiden bride. Hanna in turn does not respond (1991: 37). Later, recounting that conversation to Michael, she feels the urge to tell him about a certain traumatic incident involving the twins, "I was on the verge of telling Michael about the pain, about the twins. A gnawing fear restrained me. I kept quiet." (46).

The repeated association of the Arab playmates with visions of sexual violence, may suggest a repressed memory of some event in Hanna's childhood, possibly rape, which she is unable to forget. In this event, it is reasonable to argue that the text intimates that Hanna, once raped, longs through her dreams to again endure a defilement of her body.

A seminal deficiency in Hanna's delineation is the omission of entire chapters of her personal history; beginning with her childhood and up to the time she meets Michael. As such, a psychological vacuum exists that does not allow the author to explain her dream world. Additionally, it lessens from the value of the novel as a psychological-realistic work (Shaked 1974: 188). In a major sense, one can argue that the heroine encases within her midst a pre-determined psychology that is based on patriarchal convictions and traditional beliefs that accentuate a woman's supposed biological differences and mental abnormality. Also, Hanna’s construction reinforces a particular image of female behaviorism. As Yosef Oren observes: "...both the heroine and the compulsive psychology the author builds around her are shallow and unconvincing. Her image is simply a false one."(1968: 23).

In an interview with Shuli Brazilai (1987: 19-35), Oz was asked to comment on the heroine's proclivities for rape, and sado-masochism. Brazilai noted that, "As the novel progresses, masochistic fantasies of rape and other forms of violence gain the upper hand. When we studied the novel some of my students...protested that it was not a convincing portrayal of the inner life of woman, but rather reflected certain stereotypical male views about female masochism." (25) She then added, "They said it read like a male fantasy about what a woman wants." (ibid.). Oz responded by claiming that he never intended to portray the inner life of a woman, that he did not believe in a distinction between the sexes "I don't believe there is such a thing as a woman or a man..." (ibid.). He stated that Hanna's predisposition towards fantasizing about rape and sadomasochism "...were brought with her when
she imposed herself on me”3 (ibid). In essence, Oz expects the reader to embrace the notion that Hanna Gonen’s femaleness is incidental to the plot, an expectation which readers may find difficult to accept.

And yet in that same interview, Oz conceded that the novel was indeed the portrayal of a woman’s psychosexual predilections, albeit, not a very convincing one: "Now, whether she is representative or not, I do not know. I’m not very interested either...This particular woman is who she is. Whether she is typical or not is incidental to me...if a researcher would turn up and prove to me that she is the only one of her kind in the world, I wouldn't be too troubled actually." (25-6)

Not infrequently, male literature contains representations of rape as an insidious lie concocted by vindictive and scheming women as a reaction to men spurning their sexual advances. Susan Brownmiller, who examined the dialectics of rape in popular culture found that, "Disbelief of a woman who had said she had been raped has been built into male logic." (1975: 128), and that the common strain of thinking reflected in patriarchal literature is: "a woman scorned... can get a good man into a lot of trouble by crying rape." (22). This literary trope, manifested in the Oz corpus, brings into play dictates that have persistently galvanized the underbrush of male folklore.

The misogynous myth that posits that rape is the hysterical fantasy of women rebuffed by men resides prominently in the story Nomad and Viper. (1992: 1965) The main protagonist, Geula Sirkin, provides the ideal matrix-she is a single woman, undersexed and frustrated at the Kibbutz men who have rejected her sexually and socially. On a hot summer evening, she undertakes one of her nightly walks in the orchards. Her stroll en route to the orchard is redolent with sexual desperation and stifled eroticism alluding to the feminine being throbbing fiercely inside her and the yearning for release. Her sensuous actions prior to meeting the young Arab man disclose her attempt to reach sexual fulfillment:

By the irrigation pipe she paused, bent down and drank, as though kissing the faucet...she bent her head and let the water pour over her face and into her shirt...Geula picked a plum, sniffed and crushed it. Sticky juice dripped from it. The sight made her feel dizzy. And the smell. She crushed a second plum. She picked another and rubbed it on her cheek until she was spattered with juice. (1992: 29-30)

Consequently, she discovers a Bedouin nomad who has infiltrated the Kibbutz orchard. Finding the Bedouin shepherd repulsively attractive (despite being blind in one eye), she sets out to seduce and ensnare him. Accepting his offer of a cigarette, she asks him for another, hoping to prolong the encounter, and wants him to disrobe, excited by the prospect of physical contact, "The girl eyed his desert robe. Aren't you hot in that thing? The man gave an embarrassed, guilty smile..."(31) She twice repeats his earlier claim that he still young and therefore has no girlfriend, (intimating that she is available) and persists in asking him personal questions.

Throughout the encounter, Geula is nervous and thrilled by the potential for a sexual liaison. The young man, however, is not interested in her advances, sustaining the conversation only in an attempt to ingratiate himself to Geula and avoid being reported to the Kibbutz authority for trespassing. Finally, he retreats with his herd back to the nomad camp, leaving Geula...
disappointed and humiliated by her failure to lure the young, virginal pilferer. (34) As a host of commentators have observed, Oz’s confection of the biblical elements inescapably recalls an Israeli version of the Garden of Eden (amplified and enhanced by the later appearance of the snake) with Geula as Eve the troublemaker.5

And indeed, the rejection by the nomad of Geula’s seduction brings to the surface all the fallow hatred so patently simmering inside her. Although it is clear that no sexual or physical contact occurred (apart from Geula touching the Bedouin’s arm) (33), the young woman slowly convinces herself that she was attacked, and behaves as though she was the victim of an attempted rape. The earlier version of the story is explicit in affirming that no incident has taken place: “The young girl’s body is filled with disgust, although the nomad did not touch her.” (1965: 36) Nevertheless, she devises a more adventurous dénouement befitting her expectation. At this point, her imagination takes such a strong hold of her that the supposed particulars of the attempted rape in the orchard become actual. Fantasy intermingles with reality. Immediately after he leaves, she begins running in panic as if pursued towards her room, certain that she was attacked: “Give him a kind word, or a smile, and he pounces on you like a wild beast and tries to rape you. It was just as well I ran away from him.” (35).

She similarly imagines that she had to fight him off to escape the rape, kicking and biting the nomad as he thrust her to ground and choked her, “those black fingers, and how he went straight for my throat...It was only by biting and kicking that I managed to escape.” (ibid.) Michael Wilfe, in fact, contends that it is not only the refusal by the Bedouin to submit to Geula’s temptation that precipitates the false accusation but the shattering of the young’s woman’s anticipation of an actual rape, “It is clear she yearns for sexual contact with him, for an actual rape, in order to be redeemed.” (1977: 148).

Afterwards, in the showers, filled with physical revulsion and disgust, she washes herself and plots to inflame the already hot-tempered young men of the Kibbutz into attacking the Bedouin camp as retribution for the invented assault. Thus, Geula, who was expected to calm down the bellicose mood of the general meeting and discourage any violence, is now planning to instigate hostilities to placate her wounded pride, “I don’t support violence or believe in hooliganism, but this time they have gone too far. What does Etkin think, they steal, rape and vandalize...If not for the thing that happened to me, I may have accepted his opinion...I wonder what Etkin will say, when I tell him about the goatherder that tried to rape me in the orchard.” (1965: 137). Whereas before, Geula referred to the nomad as he, her rage and bitterness now turn her speech to them, (my italics.) “Yes, let the boys go right away tonight to their camp and smash their black bones because of what they did to me.” (1992:135). The resentment of the young man for rejecting her, simplifies and rationalizes the violence that she is about to perpetrate. (Mojtabi 1981: 35).

Unable to demarcate fiction and reality, the circumstances of the event become so real to her that on the way back to her room, unable to forget her ‘ordeal’, she vomits and cries in the bushes, exhausted from her ‘trauma’-reactions usually associated with real rape victims. Lying in the flowering shrubs, she begins to whisper poems to comfort herself, and is so entranced.
with her daydream that she is oblivious to the fact that she has blocked a
snake’s hole, preventing it from returning to its lair. (1965: 40) After being
bitten, she simply removes the thorn from her skin and remains on the
ground, choosing to absorb the venom. Clearly, Oz cares little for
verisimilitude: Geula could easily have alerted the group of youths she notices
walking by of her predicament (41). The story reaches its nadir when the
sensations Geula experiences as the poison circulates through her veins are
depicted through the aid of sexual imagery, and are likened to the joy of a
climax:

...A pleasurable pain perforates through her blood and calms her
body...the shiver of delight tatters her skin. She listens to the sweet wave
permeating her body and intoxicating her bloodstream. With total
abandon Geula responds to the sweet wave...The rapture floods the girl
and endows her with a calm peace...soft are her fingers, soft and
brimming with joy. (40-41)

Esther Fuchs remarks that: "With Geula dies her plot to incite the Kibbutz
against the Bedouin poachers. There is thus something redeeming after all in
Geula's death." (1987: 64). I wish to suggest, contra Fuchs, that, in effect,
Geula's demise is senseless—we are told that as she breathes her last breath
the young men of the Kibbutz, carrying sticks, make their way to the nomad
camp bent on teaching the Bedouins a lesson. (1965: 41). At another level,
Geula's death can be read as the treacherous Eve's comeuppance, an image
sustained by the text's suggestion that the snake's biting of Geula is not
random or capricious "Anger permeates the snake, he lifts his head and
sticks out his forked tongue. The viper's rage is not arbitrary." (40).

What Oz does here, is to resuscitate the entrenched andocentric myth
that injured feminine pride can result in the authentic creation of rape, which in
turn gives rise to a moral pretext for revenge. As Nehama Aschkenasy states
"...in the imagined rape we see the man in Amos Oz the writer, claiming as
men have done since ancient times, that rape is a feminine fabrication."

One of the indices of patriarchal fiction as regards the motif of rape has
been the dissimilar manner in which men and women perceive rape, and the
claim that the submission by women to rape not only indicates acceptance but
also signifies woman's sublimated enjoyment of it. Oz returns to this theme in
To Know a Woman (1992).

The narrative concerns Yoel, the central protagonist of the novel, who
through flashbacks and memories, recounts powerful fragments of his life with
his now deceased wife Ivria, searching for the real purport in her words and
actions. Since the author has denuded her of any voice, the reader is forced
to rely on Yoel's stream of consciousness and recollections of Ivria in the
depiction of her character. He remembers how they first met:

...the orchard among whose tree trunks he had slept with Ivria that first
time, when she had gone out to turn the irrigation pipes on or off, and he,
a soldier who had lost his way on the navigation exercise on a section
commander's training course, was there among the taps filling his water
bottle...She would not have noticed him at all if her legs had not collided
with his crouched body; just when he was certain she was going to
scream she whispered to him 'Don't Kill me'. They were both stunned,
and they hardly spoke more than ten words before their bodies suddenly clung together, clumsily groping...and they hurt each other and finished almost before they'd begun and immediately rushed off in opposite directions. (172).

Several months later, Yoel returns to Ivria's house, and waits for two days at the same spot for her; on the third night they repeat their earlier 'coitus'. While he remembers and interprets those two incidents as the result of the spontaneous attraction of two strangers, Ivria has reconstructed this very same event (the first encounter) in a very different way:

Once, one evening, at the end of an autumn day in Jerusalem, it was a Friday evening and the sadness of the hill was filling the air, he had gone out for a walk with Ivria and they had gone into the Rose Garden to watch the sunset. Ivria said, you remember when you raped me under the trees in Metullah I thought you were dumb. And Yoel, who knew that his wife rarely joked, at once corrected her and said: That's not right Ivria. It wasn't rape; if anything it was the opposite- seduction. (my italics) (221).

In contradistinction, for Ivria the reality of the encounter carried an entirely disparate set of meanings, a reality outside of Yoel's thinking and experience. Clark points out that men have often displaced rape as seduction by the victim, in an attempt to palliate both their actions and conscience:

The situation is not helped by the popular myth that any women have rape fantasies, and even "prefer" rape to non-coercive sex. No woman who has thought seriously about rape can share that belief. Many women have seduction fantasies but non have rape fantasies- the point of difference being that women do not fantasies being "taken against their will, even if their fantasies involve some degree of physical violence. It is very easy for men to transform forcible intercourse into seduction by invoking the myth of women's rape fantasies. (Clark and Lewis 1977: 141-2)

Yoel is haunted by Ivria's words and later ponders the true import of their first meeting, "What really happened all those years ago among the taps at Metullah." (1992: 186). Equally significant is Yoel's fear that Ivria's father may have given credence to his daughter's version, "He may really have believed right up to the end that I caught his daughter near the irrigation taps in the dark and raped her twice..."(my italics) (242). Yoel's reflection on this specific episode (in his overall quest to better understand his marriage) suggests that he is troubled by his actions all those years ago, and may have cause to re-examine the sweet meaning he has attached to the circumstances surrounding that meeting. Re-processing the particulars of their encounter in an attempt to convince himself that no rape took place, he has a gnawing feeling inside him that Ivria may have been right about the rape, "So whence this feeling that had been with him all evening that he had forgotten something." (32).

It is striking that the novel dispels any notion that the rape in the orchard was traumatic or frightening for Ivria, for immediately after, she tells Yoel of her interpretation of that event and adds, "But on my side it was love." (221). Moreover, following their two meetings in the orchard, they continued to see each other, and married six months later, although Ivria did not do so out of love. (32) Importantly, although satisfied that she was raped in the...

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orchard (where incidentally Geula of *Nomad and Viper* invents a rape that never was) Ivria assures Yoel that she enjoyed the experience. In doing so, she compounds the myth that holds that it is every woman's secret desire to be raped.

After further reflection, one could also conclude that what is being textually implied, again, as was evident in *My Michael* and *Nomad and Viper*, is the notion that rape is a female canard, part of a woman's fragile psychosexual state and erotic reverie. This depiction of rape has led to Jane Ussher to observe that: "Rape is not the romantic overpowering of a (willing maiden) by a gallant, if overly ardent admirer, as portrayed in romantic fiction." (1992: 31).

It is in *A Perfect Peace* (1993) that marital rape as an expression of control and authority over a weak and willing spouse is most clearly showcased. In it, the passivization plot device is taken to a *reductio ad absurdum* through the thinly characterized figure of Rimona. The novel centers on Yonathan Lifshitz, son of a Kibbutz icon, who is disillusioned with his life in the Kibbutz, marriage, and his frigid, sexually unresponsive wife Rimona, whose subservience and taciturn nature infuriate him. The wife is presented as immature and placid, endowed with an eccentric serenity that affects her behaviour and lovemaking. Yonathan, feeling constrained by this loveless and childless union expresses his contempt for his wife through gestures of verbal and physical violence, behaviour that is accepted by the emotionally and physically defenseless Rimona.

The reader vicariously experiences the sense of conquest and power Yonathan exercises over Rimona, most pellucidly when she is raped and subsequently debased. In her diary she writes of Yonatan's sudden outburst of violence: "So Yoni got up and saw me sitting in my nightgown, thinking. You're crazy he said...And Yoni grabbed me by the shoulders and took me and threw me on the bed like a sack and did it to me all clumsy and wrong and so mean that it hurt. Yoni, I whispered, stop..." (1993: 172-3). The following quote appositely encapsulates Yonathan's actions, "In rape, the emotions of aggression, hatred, contempt and the desire to break or violate personality, take a form consummately appropriate to sexual politics." (Millett 1971: 44).

Not only does Rimona submit to this forcible intercourse, she passively obeys Yonathan immediately following the incident, even though what he asks of her is humiliating and disgraceful "...Rimona. You can get up and go to him dripping with my sperm, what the hell do I care...So I went to him dripping and sat down on the floor by his side and said I had come to sing to him." (1993: 173). The reader may have some difficulty in accepting her consent to Yonathan's attack, but no feelings of anguish accompany the rape. On the contrary, later that morning, upon returning from the laundry room, she acts as if the assault never took place, instead caring devotedly for Yonathan and Azariah, "When I came home, the two of them were down with a high fever. I gave them aspirin and tea, covered them, and put them to sleep." (ibid.). Rimona's lack of resistance to Yonathan's attack further bolsters the notion that all women are defenseless victims who have no choice but to give in when confronted with this situation. Significantly, the reality of the marital rape described is marginalized and made so insignificant, that it almost becomes a
non-event in the novel. This is consistent with sexist literature's penchant of contextualizing rape as peripheral, and relegating it to a trivial level of importance in the plot.

**VIOLENCE**

More broadly, the depiction of rape has as its central trope men's violence towards women, and it is significant that narratively, apart from the presence of the theme of rape, the Oz diegesis is punctuated with scenes that contain physical and verbal violence against its female protagonists.

K.K. Ruthven explains why critics must not overlook this type of material: "Male aggression against the female is capable of being displaced...into art forms, where it reproduces women as objects of sadistic humiliation. The persistent strain of misogyny in literature is therefore a matter of concern to anybody who views symbolic aggression as existing in the same continuum as acts of physical violence." (1990: 83-4).

Physical violence is very noticeable in *Perfect Peace* (1993). Yonathan's use of physical force against Rimona is not confined to the aforementioned single incident of rape, but is manifested in other violent episodes, which dramatize the seething anger towards Rimona accumulating inside of him. A striking evidence of this is proffered in the description of his endeavours to stimulate and arouse her frigid body, endeavours which involve a mix of tenderness and physical asperity:

"The patient, bitter beating against her, the more and more desperate search everywhere for some opening, with kisses, with caresses, with cajolery, with silence, with cruelty...like a savage, like an ape, gently...obscenely, violently...his hands with sudden fury grasping, shaking her shoulders, shaking her back, her whole body, as if it were a watch that stopped ticking, even cuffing her face with the back of his hand, one time even with his fist. (my italics) (1993: 60-61).

Further, his rage is codified in the brutal imagery he chooses to express his sexual frustration and his yearning to shatter her torpid demeanor: "Once and for all to grab the bread knife and plunge it into her soft skin, into her vein and arteries, and down deeper yet, to open her up, to rampage through the dark lymph of her and the fat and the cartilage, to the innermost nooks and crannies, to the marrow of her bones, to carve her till she screamed." (61-62).

Disturbingly, the scenes of battery are reported in a non-judgmental, neutral manner, without being challenged either by the omniscient narrator or by the victim herself.

This has the effect of alienating the reader from Rimona and leading him or her to either cast the blame on the heroine for submitting to the beating, or to assume that male violence against women is an acceptable part of marriage. Quite apart from Yonathan's deplorable actions, what is even more unsettling is that nowhere in the novel does Yonathan express a modicum of remorse or regret for his actions.

*Black Box* (1993a) reinforces the misogynous notion that women respect and desire violence that they are, as patriarchal codes of ideologies proclaim, innately sado-masochistic. The novel taps a sexual machismo that articulates male prejudices about domestic violence and promotes the insidious retrograde fare about women's supposed masochistic nature. Kate Milett...
sums up this entrenched common myth as: "Masochism is female; femininity is masochistic." (1971: 194).

Oz estranges the reader from the story’s victim, Ilana Brandsetter, by intellectually eroticizing the violence and by skirting along the edge of quintessential sexist discourse- he simply grounds his female character in morally questionable cultural conventions. Jocelyne Scutt explains these conventions: "The Freudian concept of femininity, embodying an unconscious need for punishment and neurotic self-injury, is often used to explain domestic violence: why do women remain? because they love it, it is said." (1990: 127).

In her book Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Woman (a best–seller which attempted to show that there was a media generated campaign to lay the blame for society’s ills at the feet of the feminist movement and in the process thwart its progress) Susan Faludi argued that the 1980's backlash saw a clamoring by the male psychiatric fraternity to reintroduce the quaint ‘masochistic personality disorder’ that classified Masochism as an inborn female trait. (1991: 356-8)

Formally, Black Box is a structured as a series of stratagems to embed in the text the notion that Ilana, a battered wife, derived a sexual kick from the physical and verbal humiliation dished out by her ex husband Gideon. This is heightened by her reawakened yearning for his invective brand of abuse that permeates the fabric of the plot, and which explains her renewal of the relationship, seven years after its dissolution. As Walter Goodman points out: "Ilana cannot do without her husband's brand of defilement; she knows that in reinstating her connection with him she is asking for abasement." (1988: C36).

What is demonstrably clear is that the novel triangulates sexual politics by intermingling love, sex and violence, and creating an enmeshment between those three elements. Moreover, Ilana and Gideon are intended to be representative of masculine and feminine binarism— the symbolic and parabolic ingredients are borne out by the structure of the narrative. (Balaban 1988: 175).

The correspondence between the two reveals the violence perpetrated by Gideon. This is for instance, how he reacted upon discovering Ilana’s infidelity:

...you were overwhelmed with lunatic glee...you punched me until by a battering cross-examination you dragged out of me every detail, every jot and shudder, and without undressing me you fucked me standing up as though knifing me, and during and after you didn't stop interrogating me more and more and again you mounted me on the kitchen table and your teeth dug into my shoulder and you slapped me with the back of your hand, like punishing an unruly horse. (1993a: 168).

In another disturbing scene, Gideon relates another of his assaults, which this time includes his small son Boaz:

And how I came home one night and found a green lighter, not mine, on the kitchen table and started to punch you and suddenly he appeared in the kitchen in his spaceman pajamas and asked me quietly to stop because you were weaker. When I said to him, "get into bed," and went on hitting you, he picked up a little potted cactus and threw it at me, and it hit me on the cheek and I let go of you and grabbed hold of him in a frenzy and beat his golden head over and over again against the wall. I
had my pistol in my pocket and I could have fired at the two of you that night and then put a bullet in myself. (66)

Despite, but more particularly, because of Gideon's abuse, Ilana is compulsively drawn to her former husband and re-establishes their torturous association. The explicit link between Gideon's cruelty to Ilana, and her love for him is made obvious by her attraction to his sadistic brand of contempt for her: "I loved you not despite your cruelty; I loved the dragon itself." (165); "You have never had anything, and you will never have, besides your torture dungeons. Which my flesh longs for. Your tropical hell." (84).

Oddly, she asks, why, as long as she was content to remain in the marriage, despite the deplorable episodes of violence, did he abandon her? And although she speaks of their incurable love, it never manifests itself in the text. On the contrary, their "relationship is not based on affinity between equals, and there is no room in it for mutual understanding or intimacy achieved through openness and empathy." (Balaban: 162) In this context, there is no explanation in the novel why Ilana, a victim of domestic violence, several times driven to attempt suicide, seeks an emotional bond with her abuser.

To be sure, the novel through the various plot devices implies that Ilana is indeed masochistic. This impression is further emphasized by the perverse pleasure Ilana takes in degrading herself before Gideon, groveling at his feet like a submissive slavegirl: "But you were and remain my husband. My Lord and Master. Forever. You are the lord of my hatred and...Ruler of my hair and my throat and the soles of my feet. Sovereign of my breasts my belly my private parts my womb. Like a slave girl I am in thrall to you." (42-43); "Alec, I'm still prepared to lick your boots as much as you like. I'll do anything you ask of me." (5) "I'll be your wife and your servant." (144). Ilana's self hate and inexplicable yearning for humiliation is constantly reaffirmed and amplified through the focus on her present husband, Michel Sommo, who is gentle and kind- the antithesis of Gideon. (Tzoref 1988: 125)

The representation of violence against female protagonists in the Oz canon encompasses within its prism manifold ventilations. It often, only becomes apparent as one scratches the surfaces of the author's works to examine the seemingly insignificant deportment, thoughts and observations of secondary characters. The reason being that masculine hostility is frequently veiled as innocuous ruminations by a male character.

Katherine Rogers, in her Feminist manifesto on literary representation, states this premise nicely when she writes: "I include among the manifestations of misogyny in literature not only direct expressions of hatred, fear, or contempt of womankind, but such indirect expressions as misogynistic speeches by dramatic characters...and condemnations of one woman or type of woman which spread implicitly or explicitly, to the whole sex." (1966: xii-xiii) And although the subtext of anger and aggression towards women to be discussed is often only alluded to, it does affirm the presence of the consistent theme of hostility towards women interwoven within the several sub narratives.

Rami Rimon of Elsewhere Perhaps (1973) is a young man frustrated by his girlfriend, Noga Harish, who refuses to acquiesce to his sexual desires. He ponders the reason for his failure and concludes that, "...he must press harder..."
than he has pressed so far. It is well known that women admire strength. 'The more you beat them, the better they be,' the proverb says. He curses his weakness. He certainly won't get anywhere by talking." (81). Earlier, during a flirtatious interlude with Noga, he makes up his mind to 'conquer' her by force, but relents to her rebuffs.

Still, in a chapter titled 'Force', we are told of his new found determination to "...beat a new path to his friend's heart, a simple, straightforward path." (91). As a result, sometime later, while in Noga's room, he brutally grabs hold of her, squeezing her ribs and kneading her breasts, so much so that he extracts a painful moan from the young woman. (92). Undeterred by her pleas to stop he persists; he is foiled from forcing himself on Noga by the appearance of another Kibbutz member, Ezra Berger. (92-93). Later, Rami muses, "Women understand only one language, brute force." (168).

Another reference to violence towards women is again made in A Perfect Peace (1993) through a crime committed by an eccentric character named Bolognesi. His crime--murdering his brother's fiancé by chopping her head off with an axe. (18). Ezra Berger, whose motto is, "A plague on all women" (59), discloses his revulsion for the opposite sex when he echoes a biblical pronouncement, "I find woman more bitter than death,' the preacher said, and he knew what he was talking about." (ibid.) Another character, Mitya, of The Hill Of Evil Counsel (1993b) mouths patriarchal aspic about doing harm to women:

...your generation, whose souls have not been perverted by exile, have an obligation to make children by force by the women of the Fellahin. They wear long dark dresses down to their ankles, but underneath their dresses they have nothing on at all. They must be conquered and mounted by main force. With holy zeal...We must spill fresh blood, dark, warm blood. (my italics) (37-8).

Whilst it is tempting to state that these outbursts are inconsequent, they do exemplify the undercurrents of historically rooted misogynous codes of behaviour, interspersed within the stories-codes that reflect a litany of antifeminist rhetoric and attitudes. Until recently, the patriarchal legacy of violence that animates several of Oz's plots and which is inextricably enmeshed in the configuration of female psychology, has been, for the most part, overlooked within the scholarly community. Yet, with the growing attention by feminist criticism to such ideas, the identification of similar themes suffusing Oz's writing is certain to surface and is welcomed addition to this important path.

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1 See Lorrene Clark & Debra Lewis (1977:141-2; 86). For an extensive treatment of this subject-matter, see Andrea Medea and Kathleen Thompson. (1974).

2 Carter argues that misogynous and pornographic novels are often written in a female first person narrative so as to reinforce male points of view. (1979: 15-16).


4 Both the English and Hebrew editions have been referred to in the body of the text. All Hebrew translations are mine.


6 Given this limpid statement of events it is hard to understand how Gila Ramras Rauch can ask: "What has happened between the two?...has a rape occurred? We do not know with any certainty." (1989: 155). Ramras-rauch's question distinctly illuminates how critical examination of sexist strains in Oz's work has been overlooked or misinterpreted.

7 In her formulation of a list of Female stereotypes Mary Ellman includes Passivity as a specific category: "...the stereotype of passivity is strengthened by a physiological impression now of the horizonality, atonality and torpidity of women." (1968: 79).