Beginning with the female grotesque body in its midst, this study examines the bodies of key fictional characters from the center and margins of contemporary Israeli society that Alona Kimhi constructs in her novel Lily La Tigresse and considers their political implications. It asserts that the image of a well-built and almighty Jewish male body that the Zionist revolutionaries of the early twentieth century dreamt of remains, in Kimhi’s view, a beau ideal in present-day Israel. However, the idealization of a healthy Jewish male body has given rise not to a healthy Jewish nation that the Zionist forefathers desired, but to a self-appointed sociocultural elite that seeks to sustain its position on the top by violently excluding all others who are pushed to the margins and left to invent their own identities.

Crossing borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal—to the animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself.

Jacques Derrida

1. THE POLITICS OF THE BODY IN ISRAELI CULTURE AND SOCIETY

The Zionist revolution aimed at creating a new people fit for a new land was not only a national, political, and cultural movement of liberation, but also a “bodily revolution.”2 According to Meira Weiss and others, (male) bodybuilding and nation building have been wholly interwoven since the early days of Zionism with the purpose of curing what Yehuda Lieb Pinsker famously dubbed “Judophobia”: the disembodied Jewish nation in the Diaspora and the image of a feeble, sickly Jewish man it has fostered.3 The trend has been reinforced through the idealization of the body of the Jewish pioneer (halutz) working the soil of the land of Israel during the first half of the twentieth century and later on by way of glorification of the sabra, an Israeli born, new Jew, stereotypically a kibbutznik (or moshavnik), whose perfectly

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1 A. Kimhi, Lily la tigresse: Melodrama; Jerusalem: Keter, 2004).
3 Pinsker (1821–1891) was the founder and leader of Hovevei Zion, also known as Hibbat Zion (Lovers of Zion) movement.
strapping physique is on full display in the fields and battlefields of his beloved land.⁴

Decades later, Israel’s pioneering days are long gone and many of its core values have markedly changed. And yet the image of a virile, Jewish, Ashkenazi, perfect, working/fighting male sabra, in short, what Weiss labels “the chosen body” has never ceased to be the axis of Israel’s social and political organization, as she argues throughout her book. It is therefore not surprising that literary oeuvre of Israeli women, from its inception, has become increasingly focused on the female body, and that this body’s exclusion and marginalization, if not total abjection (in Kristevian sense of the term),⁵ has been used by female authors as a potent tool in challenging the “chosen [male] body” and subverting its mythical powers.⁶ Having started from within Israeli women “mainstream,” that is, with Ashkenazi, Israeli natives (sabras), these challenges have been gaining an ever-increasing strength with the rise of a new generation of non-native authors: daughters of Holocaust survivors, women of Sephardic origin, and finally a newcomer to the genre, Alona Kimhi, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union.

2. ALONA KIMHI

Born in Ukraine in 1966, Kimhi immigrated to Israel with her parents when she was five years old. The family settled in a neighborhood inhabited predominately by immigrants from the former Soviet Union, which Kimhi fled as soon as she reached her teens. After military service, she moved to Tel Aviv and since that day never set foot in her parents’ home. In time, she became a stage and film actress, a writer of plays, lyrics, and essays, and a well-known figure among Tel Aviv’s exclusive club of celebrated artists. In 1996, Kimhi published her first work of fiction, a collection of short stories I, Anastasia, for which she was awarded the ACUM Book of the Year prize for new writers.⁷ Her first novel, Weeping Susannah, came out in 1999 and

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⁴ For an excellent study of the images of the male body in Zionist discourse and Modern Hebrew literature since the revival period, see M. Gluzman, <i>The Zionist body: Gender and sexuality in Modern Hebrew literature; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007</i>.


⁶ For example, in his analysis of Moshe Shamir’s seminal 1948 novel, <i>He Walked the Fields</i>, Gluzman argues that the Diaspora Jew is associated with the feminine and that the image of the new Israeli Jew (sabra) is established by means of rejection/exclusion of femininity, which in the eyes of the Israeli is within the domain of the “abject” (M. Gluzman, <i>The Zionist Body</i>, p. 197).

received multiple awards. Lily La Tigresse was published in 2004 to mixed reviews.

Kimhi’s affinity for feminism and women’s plight is obvious in all her literary works. Her stories are populated by female characters caught in a world not of their own making and subjected to mighty forces they are unable to challenge. Designed to induce both empathy and loathing, Kimhi’s prototypical female fictional character is somewhat malformed, either physically or mentally—in a word, increasingly grotesque. Her attraction to the grotesque is preeminent in Weeping Susannah and returns with increased force in Lily La Tigresse. However, her critical arrows are no longer limited to exclusively female targets but also aimed at present-day Israeli society, the “muscular Jew” in its midst, and the social margins that engulf it.

3. THE FEMALE GROTESQUE BODY IN LILY LA TIGRESSE

The term “grotesque” generally suggests the opposite of beauty and attractiveness, and it is often associated with the misshapen, the bizarre, the monstrous, or otherwise “strangely or fantastically distorted.” According to prominent studies of the grotesque in art and literature, its association with “deviance” implies a fantastic inversion of a well-ordered state or classical norms, which makes grotesque images very attractive to women and the social change they seek. As Mary Russo asserts: “The classical [beautiful] body is...closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek...the grotesque body is...multiple and changing...it is identified with...social transformation.”12

Set in contemporary Tel Aviv, Lily La Tigresse is rendered as an old-fashioned “melodrama,” as suggested by the book’s subtitle. It is essentially the story of a heartbroken young Israeli woman whose life completely falls apart following a desertion by the “love of her life.” It was not supposed to happen this way. In fact, Lily’s life was expected to take a rather blissful course. She was born in Israel to an Ashkenazi family that had settled in the

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9 For additional information about the author and a list of reviews of her works, see online: http://library.osu.edu/sites/users/galron.1/00225.php. Since the completion of the present study, Kimhi has published her third novel, Victor and Masha: A. Kimhi, (Victor and Masha; Jerusalem: Keter, 2012).
heart of Tel Aviv. Her parents had great hopes and expectations for their only daughter, as typical Ashkenazi Israeli parents do, and carved a brilliant future for their ever one-of-a-kind offspring. “I was always looking toward a good future, filled with light,” Lily asserts once her life begins to unravel (pp. 20–21) and she finds herself not on a glorious theater stage, as her parents (both theater actors) envisioned, but in the darkness of Israel’s fringe society where characters from the underworld play a key role.\textsuperscript{13}

Lily’s body is front and center in her misfortune. Weighing 112 kilograms, or 247 pounds, her huge physique has rejected all attempts to reduce it—be it by numerous external encouragements, or by her own desperate attempts (p. 34). At first Lily’s physical appearance did not seem to deter the man who ended up breaking her heart. In fact, he seemed to fully enjoy her plump bosom and buttocks—until the idea of a marriage came up, and Lily proved unable to shrink her body into the skimpy wedding dress he had bought for her during one of his many overseas trips, in hope she will somehow fit the mold he had carved for his future wife. That the quest for an ideal bride rests on her slim figure should not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with contemporary bourgeois Western culture and the myth of a twiggy-like female it perpetuates. In the case of \textit{Lily La Tigresse}, the grotesquely obese—if not monstrous—female figure in the center of the novel certainly signifies feminist resistance to the control that social norms assert over women’s bodies. But also, perhaps mostly, it is a literary tool in the hands of a female Israeli author who has risen from the margins of contemporary Israeli society and successfully penetrated the top ranks of Tel Aviv’s social and cultural world only to confront the myth of the Israeli “chosen body“ and its social implications.

4. The Myth of the Chosen Body in Contemporary Israeli Society

Playing a relatively small role in what eventually becomes an epic \textit{Bildungsroman} that features for the most part shady characters from Israel’s underworld, the man who triggers all other events in \textit{Lily La Tigresse} is certainly a beau ideal in modern Israeli society shaped by the Zionist revolution: an ultimate prototype of a “Jew with muscles” that passionate Zionists

\textsuperscript{13} Here and below, the quotes from \textit{Lily La Tigresse} refer to the Hebrew edition of the book. All translations are by the author of the present article. The novel has been published in English (A. Kimhi, \textit{Lily La Tigresse: A Melodrama} [trans. D. Bilu; Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2013]), French, German, Italian, and Portuguese.
envisioned. His name alone, Amikam (literally “my nation has risen”) Ur-Kasdim (the native city of the biblical Abraham; see Gen 11:28) suggests an established Israeli male prototype that Kimhi proceeds to design in terms so perfect as to inspire both awe and ridicule all at once. A member of the kibbutz where he was born, Amikam is a senior officer in the military reserve and an offspring of an Israeli clan of warriors; he holds a sales job in Tel Aviv and travels regularly around the world. His grandfather, Nahché Ur-Kasdim (formerly Baranovich), was a fighter in Palmach; his grandfather’s brother, Yehoram (Surik) Ur-Kasdim, a member of Palyam; his father, Daniel (Dan-Dan) Ur-Kasdim, one of the “brave men who climbed breathlessly the Temple Mount on an historic June day back then in sixty-seven” (p. 35).

Sitting in front of three generations of war heroes in their well-established kibbutz at customary Friday night dinners, Lily was utterly bewitched by these men’s Übermensch qualities—their golden/copper tanned light skin and their Aryan (!) blue eyes, even as their big fat crooked noses remained the last remnants of the “Diaspora disgrace” they had worked so hard to shed (p. 227). While his own heroic deeds remained unknown to her (or to the reader), Lily was wholly enamored with Amikam’s military status: with his command of an “acclaimed Armored Corps unit” based in the West Bank (“south of Ramallah”), yet more so with the two bronze fig leafs on his military uniform that mark his high ranking in Israel’s armed forces. She was mesmerized by the scent of sweat and gun oil his uniform emitted and she venerated his aggressive seizing of the “soft feminine body” when he came home on a leave and they engaged in anal sex that he demanded and carried out like a “continuation of a forceful military action” (p. 34).

Amikam’s body is front and center of his appeal whether it is his hair—the stubs that appear on his face soon after he shaves—his hirsute armpits and bushy crotch, or legs, “stubby and firm…like those of a coachman, a professional horse rider. His movement, his breath, each and every gene and cell of Amikam Ur-Kasdim’s body said: man, this is a man” (p. 36). Thus

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15 Baranovich was a well-regarded Jewish shtetl in White Russia (Belarus) before its destruction in the Holocaust. The Palmach was the crack fighting force of the underground Jewish army in Palestine during the British Mandate. Being a “Palmachnik,” or Palmach member, was associated not only with valor but also with an honorable way of life. The Palmach contributed significantly to Israeli culture and ethos well beyond its military achievements. Its members for many years formed the backbone of the command cadre in Israel Defense Forces and were prominent in Israeli politics, literature, and culture (see online: palmach.org.il). The Palyam was the Palmach’s marine unit focusing on sabotage of the British navy. All nicknames in Amikam’s lineage are well-known symbols of socially privileged men in Israeli society at their time.

we hear Lily reminisce as she proceeds to sum up the virtues of his manhood using a string of superfluous adjectives: “absolute, innate, captivating, venerable, overpowering” (p. 37).

While Amikam Ur-Kasdim’s entire manliness rests on various parts of his body, the comical effects of his portrayal signal, with many other works of literature in contemporary Israel, the end of the Zionist era together with the Zionist idealization of the body of the new Jewish male—as argued, for example, by Michael Gluzman.16 And yet, while most literary works of the post-Zionist era feature, as he notices, a prototypical male antihero—sterile rather than virile, impotent rather sexually vigorous—Kimhi’s subversive intents cunningly bring back the Zionist ideal image of a Jewish male and position him in the heart of contemporary Israel’s social arrangement, only to expose the empty suit it has become—while never losing its desirability.

Desire, as poststructuralist thinkers famously note, is a psychological and socio-cultural construct—not a natural instinct. Human beings’ hearts and minds, they argue, are programmed by conventions. They are pawns of what Jacques Lacan famously dubbed the “symbolic order,” namely, of conventionalized significations that are inherent in the structures of language and determine the speakers’ worldview.17 According to Ronald Barthes, meanings encoded in language are not neutral or accidental; essentially, they are “mythologies” that a ruling class invents and perpetuates in order to uphold its dominance.18

The desire for an idealized Israeli male body as rendered in Lily La Tigresse reflects the social codes that predetermine the consciousness of members of Israeli society from birth to death and that are introduced to culture, as argued by both Lacan and Barthes, through language inferences and the national mythologies the educational systems propagate. Evidently, Amikam’s virtues have nothing to do with any innate heroic deeds and/or distinctions but with a social persona that has been firmly established by a group dominant in Israel since the pre-state period. The entire Israeli educational system, formal and informal, has evolved around the worship of a privileged “masters’ breed” (נועים אודנים) of Israelis (p. 35) that is responsible for the typecast of “absolute, innate, captivating, venerable, overpowering”

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17 A central term in Lacan’s works, the “symbolic order” represents the laws and restrictions that are imposed on any human being as soon as he or she enters the society. They control both desire and the rules of communication, shaping the world of accepted societal, cultural, and linguistic conventions.
Israeli manliness that Kimhi’s choice of words powerfully describes.\textsuperscript{19} The political outcome of achieving social ascendency, as poststructuralist thinkers argue, is an undue sense of omnipotence, which the members of any privileged group systemically fight hard to sustain, mainly by marginalizing and excluding all others—that is, anyone who is somewhat different or otherwise does not fit their glorified mold.\textsuperscript{20} In the scheme of \textit{Lily La Tigresse}, however, the exaltation of Amikam Ur-Kasdim is constructed as a double-edged sword. Positioning him in a liminal space between mythology and farce allows Kimhi to highlight the unrelenting dominance of the “chosen body” in present-day Israel and yet, at the very same time, deconstruct the lure of this body and dismantle its idealized prowess.

When the reader briefly meets Amikam for the second time in the second part of \textit{Lily La Tigresse}, it is two years after the breakup. While trying on elegant outfits in a fancy boutique in the trendy State Square in the northern part of Tel Aviv, Lily feels a tap on her shoulder and there he is, same old Amikam, with his old “sun burnt face” and “strong teeth”—the same symbols of potency and strength Lily venerated in the past. However, her running back into his wide open “sun burnt arms” admittedly is driven not by love but by a deeply rooted desire for “a safe shore” she had lost when he left her. It is a desire to belong to the Ur-Kasdim clan, the promise of security it entails, and mostly the prospects of her turning into an \textit{Übermensch} like the Ur-Kasdims and the entire kibbutz tribe (pp. 224–226). All this, however, comes crushing down when Lily realizes that the “real man” she idolized has lost his sexual potency and that the only thing that arouses him is an imaginary Arab youngster trembling before him and pleading for mercy (p. 233).

Blurring the boundaries between body and body politics, the reputed virility of the native Israeli male featured in the first part of \textit{Lily La Tigresse} assumes, in a single short scene in the second part, a convoluted form of chauvinism that derives directly from the Zionists’ muscular ethos. To sustain the reputation of their distinguished ancestors, Kimhi suggests, Israeli men like Amikam ought to be revered first in the battlefield, or in the Arab territories Israel holds since 1967, to establish their manliness. In her design, this results in the objectification of Arabs and women alike.

\textsuperscript{19} In an interview with Dalia Karpel in \textit{Haaretz} (March 23, 2004), Kimhi professes that Amikam Ur-Kasdim represents a type of Israeliness she once desired, saying that there is definitely a “master breed” of Israelis who possess a deep sense of ownership that she “can only dream about.”

Yet, this is still not the end of the story. Amikam’s loss of potency (caused by suspension from his post in the military for use of excessive force caught on camera and shown on CNN), and more so the grotesque shape of his “withered organ” Lily desperately and unsuccessfully tries to bring back to life in effect bring about the female protagonist’s crude awakening (p. 229). As she witnesses the focus of her desire turning into what Kristeva calls a “jettisoned object,” Lily is overcome by hunger and nausea that, according to Kristeva, is a psychological reflex that marks the collapse of meaning and the entry into an unknown world devoid of structure and recognized contents humans need to make sense of their lives. 21 “In the past,” Lily states, “had I been asked to say one thing that I know without a doubt, I would have said that the only thing I know for sure in our dubious world is that Amikam is a man, truly a man” (p. 234).

Over the next two pages of the novel we continue to hear of the “structural” grounds for this conviction: the way he drives a car, his assertiveness, his incessant womanizing and flagrant sexual appetite. The collapse of Amikam’s manhood—the only thing she knew for sure—therefore signifies a collapse of Lily’s world together with its secure boundaries and the beginning of a new reality marked by utter chaos. “Now,” she concludes, “just like a philosopher on his deathbed, all I know is that I know nothing” (p. 236). Words she now hears drop into space like crystal balls into a waterless pool, saying nothing, signifying nothing, expressing nothing. Phonetic sounds...I wonder incessantly how thin the shell that separates me from the world is. Language turns into a thin cellophane veil and beyond it there is a sprawling world—unified, with no boundaries. (p. 239)

5. NOT OF THE ZIONIST BREED: SHADOWS OF THE HOLOCAUST

The myth of the “chosen body” that Amikam Ur-Kasdim represents in Lily La Tigresse contrasts in the novel not only with the grotesque depiction of the imperfect narrator, Lily, but also with many other flawed characters on the margin of Israeli society, beginning with Lily’s parents—“an adult Jewish version of Ken and Barbie” that “were mass produced in a doll factory and sold in pairs” (p. 15). In Kimhi’s hands, the implications of the perfect bodies, or otherwise idealized images, of the well-known pair of dolls become increasingly farcical when the “perfection” of the thin parents be-

comes associated with denigrated images of post-war Jewish immigrants. It begins with the father’s antiquated European, counter-sabra appearance in “old but perfectly ironed suit pants held by a beige fake leather belt…and an oversized shirt—tucked into the pants and buttoned all the way up to the neckline” (p. 15). His picture-perfect mate, the mother, is dressed in an “airy” flowery dress that was made to order from a piece of fabric she bought in Nahalat Binyamin Street in the center of Tel Aviv.\footnote{Nahalat Binyamin, one of the oldest streets in Tel Aviv, was, according to some accounts, named after Herzl (whose Hebrew name was Binyamin Zeev). It is mainly known for its textile stores.}

The bourgeoisie cloth, from which Lily’s parents are cut, against the background of well-known streets of the first Hebrew city that bear the names of celebrated Zionist visionaries is only one side of Kimhi’s deconstructive criticism. More importantly, however, the “hypertextual” implications of the parents’ depiction, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense of the word, suggest “otherness” and even “abjection” of Israeli Jews who are not of the so-called “Zionist breed.”\footnote{By the term “hypertext,” Bakhtin denotes that textual meaning is socially constructed, that is, imposed upon the text from outside rather than extracted from within it.} Born to Holocaust survivors, Lily’s parents—the narrator tells us with obvious disdain—have, unlike the children of Zionist settlers, “witnessed the abyss with their own eyes”; they are forever affected, perhaps infected, by its horrors and therefore live in constant fear that it might happen again (p. 16). Moreover, as actors in a Yiddish theater they are completely stuck in the totally rejected if not utterly despised old European world of pre-war Jewry (p. 93). In sum, the parents’ image, complete with their frail bodies, feeble souls, unseasonable fashion, and the entire way of life, signifies detested “diaspora traits…[and] a Yiddisher shtetl mentality” (p. 87) that are diametrically opposed to the strong, self-assured new Israeli mold represented by Amikam Ur-Kasdim. Hence, they are incessantly mocked and ridiculed by their quasi-mainstream daughter who sees them through the eyes of the idealized Israeli figure she has been trained to worship because she so eagerly looks forward to fully assimilating by marrying into the Ur-Kasdim dynasty (pp. 226–227).

Abjection of one’s parents is, according to Kristeva, a necessary psychological process that stems from an innate desire for differentiation, individuality, and independence.\footnote{J. Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, pp. 2–3.} But the elements of loathing and ridicule that accompany the depiction of outmoded parents in Kimhi’s novel point not only to the protagonist’s psychological development, but mainly to a nation in the process of (re)formation that entails a radical differentiation from its
past history, namely from its Diaspora womb. Anything that looks like the past of European Jews must be disproved. The disdain, if not downright elimination of the Diaspora-like persona is essential for the establishment of a new one, fitted for a new nation of “whole-bodied and physically fit” people.25

6. SHADOWS OF THE DIASPORA: THE RUSSIAN WHORE

The story of Lily’s veneration of Amikam and her final realization, two years later, that his presumed manliness is a pathetic form of a phallic complex, empowered by control and subjugation of the abjected “other,” in this case Arabs and women alike, occupies a relatively small part of Lily La Tigresse. However, it plays a major role in shedding light on the virility of the ultimate Israeli that the Zionist imagination has enabled and on the social implications for all others—women and newcomers. This story triggers the rest of Lily’s tale about her harrowing experiences on the margins of Israel’s society that follow Amikam’s rejection and her unforeseen interface with a whole other world of horrors she encounters beyond what Kristeva calls an “imaginary border,” or, in Lily’s words, outside the “decadent shelter” that was built around her by her conventionalized parents (p. 88).

The key to this world is Ninush, Lily’s best (and only) friend, as unlikely as their relationship might appear. They met in the dental clinic where Lily worked. As a dental hygienist, Lily had certainly encountered many people with bad teeth, yet when this new patient, Ninush, opened her mouth, even her gaze of an experienced professional froze in an attempt to disguise the revulsion caused by the sight of two full lines of utterly rotten, black, crooked, deformed, frightening teeth that looked “as if they were a pegged fence to hell itself” (p. 31).

Ninush is in every respect Lily’s antithesis from both within and without, the ultimate “other” that mainstream Israelis, including second-generation sabras like Lily, by and large commonly cast aside for the sake of establishing their own idealized personas and preserving their place within the boundaries of their social stratum. And indeed, as Lily shamefacedly admits, when they met for the first time two years earlier, she was highly reluctant to welcome Ninush into her life, defined then by a seemingly promising relationship with Amikam.

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A lone Russian immigrant, Ninush is thin and generally very attractive. She is delicate and eerily flexible due to a rare genetic disorder that affects not only her bone structure but also her joints, skin, and tissues. Orphaned at a young age, she became a subject of exploitation, use, and abuse by every male who professed interest in her, willing to take her under his wing and provide for her whimsical needs in exchange for a complete surrender. Having spent most of her life with pimps and crooks—some specializing in trafficking of women as well as children—she does not appear fazed by any act or scene, no matter how immoral, appalling, violent, brutal, sadistic, or animalistic it might be. She has no expectations from anybody or anything beyond her immediate, physical survival. Unlike Lily, who analyzes everything in terms of space, time, and memory, Ninush lives solely in the present and does not derive any moral from her “reprehensible” life experiences, which she shares impassively with Lily in no particular order, for there is no order in her life, no moral lessons to be learned, no cause or effect.

The portrayal of Ninush is at once real and surreal. A by-product of a significant increase in the so-called “sex trade” in Israel since the beginning of a mass wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s (p. 57), she is an ultimate “Russian whore” Israelis love to hate: beautiful and disgusting at once, attractive yet repulsive.²⁶ And yet, realistic as her representation appears, Ninush’s numerous deficiencies create a grotesquely misshapen figure that in many ways brings to mind the imagined physical weaknesses of Diaspora Jews Zionism came to loathe.²⁷ An innocent victim of an “inconceivable fate” (p. 29), Ninush is an essentially sickly being (p. 28). The chronic, hereditary disorder that she suffers from makes her look like a “little rag.”²⁸ A major symptom of her incurable disease is the lack of muscles(!)²⁹ By contrast to the hale and hearty Israeli prototype Kimhi renders in the image of Amikam—thick-skinned, tanned, with sunburnt strong arms Lily was so proud to hold (p. 36)—Ninush’s skin is “thin and transparent, even strange and unpleasant to touch” (p. 29). Her battered body is covered with permanent scars. She is wounded easily and often, and her open wounds keep bleeding, “refusing to heal” (p. 29). Since

²⁶ The mass immigration of the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in a major expansion of Israel’s underworld and in the appearance of “Russian” prostitutes in grubby places where white European women had never been seen before. This phenomenon may have something to do with an unexpectedly large wave of newcomers to a small country with limited economic resources.
²⁸ Note that in Israeli Hebrew (which probably borrowed the trope from Russian) the word “rag” (סטרטש) connotes a submissive person.
²⁹ On the Zionists’ desire for “Judaism with a muscle,” see above.
her bones are brittle, another major physical deficiency that she suffers from is absence of a firm backbone (p. 30) that is widely used as a trope of poise, strength, stability, self-confidence, and independence in Hebrew, English, and other languages. Finally, Ninush’s most prominent defect—advanced dental decay—points symbolically to a lack of “battlement and fortification” that strong teeth signify in art and literature since times immemorial.30

Given that the figure of a hapless woman is front and center in Zionism’s anti-diaspora discourse (in contrast to the tough male image it sought to create), Ninush—attractive as she is—embodies the most despicable traits of a Diaspora Jew that mainstream Israelis utterly abhor.31 With her frail body and rotting teeth, she personifies frailty, defenselessness, submission, and bondage. Moving from one master to another, she epitomizes the continuous exploitation and mistreatment of the wandering Jew. With no expectations for the future, her entire existence is suggestive of Jews’ day-to-day survival mode in the Diaspora. As an “invisible being” (p. 37), she is the image of a nation with no recognition or stature. Above all, however, Ninush’s grotesque figure signifies a fundamental paradox inherent from the beginning in the very idea of Israel’s national identity. Following the Zionists’ insistence on the annihilation of Jewish Diaspora traits, “Israeliness” is founded on abjection of these traits yet needs to confront them over and again with every wave of mass immigration from all over the world since the establishment of the state in 1948.

The fact that Ninush is not even Jewish according to the halakah—she is one of the many part-Jews and non-Jews who managed to escape to Israel from the hardship of the Communist USSR before its total collapse only to find themselves in the mean streets of Tel Aviv—points to yet another rampant myth that Kimhi exploits in order to challenge the antagonism toward the “others” in contemporary Israeli society. “Russian” immigrants in Israel are often brutally vilified, as evident throughout the Israeli blogosphere, for falsely assuming Jewish identity, but there is twofold irony inherent in this denunciation. In the first place, mainstream Israelis, like the respected Amikam Ur-Kasdim in Lily La Tigresse, are mostly secular Jews who have generally disregarded the strictures of the halakah since the early days of Zionism. Secondly, marginalization and distrust of Russian immigrants in Israel constitute to some extent a mirror image of the hostility, prejudice,

31 See M. Gluzman, The Zionist Body, p. 15.
and discrimination against Jews in Russia over the centuries of Diaspora, in other words, a reflection of anti-Semitic attitude.

Another biting irony lurking in the treatment of Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel, be they Jewish according to the halakah or not, is that in the USSR they were collectively considered Jews—a foreign (and therefore abjected) element—regardless of their self-identification. Having immigrated to the Jewish state, they became collectively “Russians”—a foreign element once again and as such a highly stereotyped “other” as well as a collective object of fascination, imagination, and rejection all at once.\(^2\) In Kimhi’s novel, Russian characters like Ninush are products of an Israeli system that opened the country’s gates to the people who had battled the syndromes of marginalization in Diaspora only to leave them on the margins of Israeli society, forced to battle the very same syndromes.\(^3\)

7. Pictures from the “Russian” Underworld

The process of marginalization of Russian immigrants in Israel and their total abjection based on stereotyping and xenophobic attitudes continues to be examined in *Lily La Tigresse* in the image of Chingiz Megometov, also known by the nickname Belt Buckle. His name indicates that he is a native of one of the Caucasian or Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union while at the same time alluding to the Mongolian ruler Genghis Khan (Chingiz Han in Russian) and the prophet Mohammed (Magomet in Russian), both known as efficient and brutal conquerors. Living up to the associations conjured by his moniker and his real name, he frequently uses his trademark belt together with other sadistic means to keep his many subordinates under full control (p. 53).

Megometov is Ninush’s ex-pimp and a major force that shaped the course of her life. Moreover, Kimhi’s meticulous attention to this character and her detailed rendering of discrete aspects of his life strongly suggest that he plays a significant role in the novel and the political pattern that underlies it.

The sole owner of a so-called “escort service,” Megometov fits yet another persistent allegation leveled against Russian immigrants as a group:

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\(^3\) Numerous stories of stereotyping, discrimination, and marginalization shared by Russian immigrants in Israel can be found online; see, for example, [http://www.e-mago.co.il/phorum/read-5-19707-19707.htm](http://www.e-mago.co.il/phorum/read-5-19707-19707.htm).
they are held responsible for taking sex business in Israel, supposedly negligible prior to their arrival, to a whole new level.

Belt Buckle ran an exceptionally successful business, particularly for a small country like ours with such a small demand for this kind of industry...much like the first Hebrew prostitute and first Hebrew thief signaled our turning into a nation marked by fascination and failure, Megometov’s initiative elevated us, as far as this type of business is concerned, to be one of the most advanced countries among the enlightened West. (p. 53)

The sarcastic overtones of this statement are obvious and need no further elucidation. That Megometov’s “exclusive business” is nestled among others of the same kind on a street named after Ben Avigdor, a prominent Hebrew author and a pioneering publisher who devoted his life to the renewal of Hebrew literature and culture around the turn of the twentieth century, further augments the irony of Kimhi’s narrative.34 And yet, as corrupt and corrupting as Megometov might appear, and in spite of the many appalling deeds attributed to him in the novel, including human trafficking, enslavement, and sexual exploitation of innocent victims—mainly women, children, and invalids from poor Eastern European lands—his portrayal, somewhat surprisingly, does not suggest a prototypical villain, certainly not in the literary sense of the word, especially as far as traditional tales, fairy tales, and/or melodramas are concerned. To begin with, he is far removed from the novel’s protagonist, Lily, and as such cannot be perceived as an antagonist who can affect her life.35 Toward Ninush, whom he had found homeless in a city park (p. 57), Megometov acts in a “fatherly” manner (p. 63), treating her as a member of his close-knit family and valuing her adaptability, versatility, and loyalty. Addressing her by the endearing Russian nickname, “Kukla” (doll), he is gentle with her, supportive, even nurturing, this in spite of her many deficiencies and her constant failure to carry out many of the different roles he assigns to her be it prostitution, housekeeping, or other menial jobs (p. 63). In sum, even as far as Ninush is concerned, Megometov by and large is far from being a classical literary antagonist. His wicked deeds do not have negative effects on any of the major characters in the novel, Lily or

34 Another location Megometov uses for his prostitution business is on the corner of two famous Tel Aviv streets named for celebrated Hebrew poets of the Middle Ages, Ibn Gabirol and Yehuda Halevi, known for their yearning for homeland.
35 In the scheme of the novel, the only true villain is Amikam Ur-Kasdim.
Ninush, and do not appear to constitute an evil agency in the plot of the novel, as is usually the case with literary villains.\textsuperscript{36}

That Megometov lacks long-established villainous qualities is also suggested by the description of his awesome physical appearance. A good-looking man in the “prime of his life,” he does have a “humped nose”—a well-known trademark of a villain—but this facial feature is immediately characterized as essentially “aristocratic” (p. 52). Contrary to the typical hunchback image of a classical antagonist, Megometov’s back is strikingly erect, and despite chronic lower back pains he has “famously straight gait” (p. 55).\textsuperscript{37} Neither does he sport a twisted mustache or leering evil eyes; instead, his most prominent attribute is “magnificently…agile narrow hips” (p. 52). Highlighted by the (in)famous belt buckle stamped with an image of a bald eagle, the “noble bird that stands for America itself,” Megometov’s glorious hips make him look much more like a desired sex symbol, akin to legendary American idols like Elvis Presley and James Dean (to name a few), than a malicious villain (p. 52).

Fastidiousness that Kimhi ascribes to Megometov, his affinity for beauty and perfection, aesthetics and cleanliness—in a business commonly viewed as essentially shoddy, ugly, dirty, and repulsive—is as striking as his physical appearance and constitutes yet another irony in the novel as well as another challenge to a “mythological” image. These traits are matched by the perfectly middle-class lifestyle of Megometov’s family in a well-established town of Yehud near Tel Aviv, heavily populated by Russian immigrants. Megometov’s home life is all but ideal (p. 68): his wife, a well-educated compatriot he met and wed prior to their immigration to Israel, is loving and supportive; they are surrounded by a loving family and many friends. His house is large and decorated à la mode, and he is a devoted father of four sons (“born precisely two years apart”), three of them with divine/angelic names.\textsuperscript{38}

Whereas Megometov’s profession/occupation in his native land is subtly omitted, it is nevertheless clear that the prostitution ring he established in Israel neither reflected his background nor was his first choice. His first

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36}See “villain” in Random House Unabridged Dictionary. Online: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/villain.
\item \textsuperscript{37}Megometov’s humped nose and concealed back pains are common attributes of the devil but may also suggest old Jewish stereotypes that are not apparent in this character.
\item \textsuperscript{38}Michael, Refael, and Netanel. The fourth is Tomer ‘palm tree’. Four sons perhaps allude to the Passover haggadah according to which four repetitions of the biblical commandment to recount the Exodus story presuppose four different types of a child to whom the story should be told—wise, wicked, simple, and “the one that does not know how to ask.”
\end{itemize}
venture in Tel Aviv was a small, insignificant import business of flip flops, toys, and straw mats from China that turned him into a “nervous wreck” (p. 64). The only rationale for his move to the prostitution business is provided indirectly: “Each person needs to know what he can do best,” Megometov states (p. 138). And what he can do best is go back to the place he is most familiar with—Eastern Europe—and exploit the human misery there for his own financial gain. The fact that what he does so well is against the law, and dangerous, does not faze him and actually adds to the American Wild West image he tries to convey. The immorality of his operation is never an issue; it appears to be utterly disregarded not only by him, but also by his otherwise remarkably self-righteous wife. A former engineer, who has proudly become a full-time mother and, in her own words, the “relevant wife” behind the great success of her husband, Nina Megometov eagerly provides the ideology that allows her husband to conduct his dirty business with a strong sense of conviction and entitlement. 39 “Akin to many of her compatriots,” we are told, perestroika has become for her an opportunity for new awakening and a new value system…. She believed wholeheartedly that one of the advantages of the liberal thought that envelops us as we enter the twenty-first century is the new tolerance toward old ideas, which since the women’s revolution have become abominable. (p. 64)

The tenets of the early-twentieth century “liberal thought” Nina Megometov supports are the well-known principles of what is commonly known as “classical liberalism.” A political ideology that was developed in Western Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, it is committed to the ideal of limited government and individual liberty; after the fall of Communism, it gained major, if fleeting, support in the former Soviet Union. It is based on Adam Smith’s mid-eighteenth century argument that each individual, motivated by self-interest, is most productive once he or she finds out the most advantageous employment for the capital, skills, or labor at his or her disposal, and therefore no authority or law should determine what is to be produced. Moreover, according to classical liberalism, social equality sought by both communists and feminists is an unattainable ideal

39 About 82,000 Soviet-trained engineers and technicians arrived in Israel during the late 1980s and 1990s, joining some 30,000 of their local colleagues and creating dramatic over-supply of engineering cadres on the small Israeli market. As Larissa Remennick has shown, many of the new arrivals, mainly women, have not been able to find employment in their profession: L. Remennick, “Career Continuity among Immigrant Professionals: Russian Engineers in Israel,” Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 29 (2003): 701–721.
because people are innately different; some have loftier motives, such as ambition, while those of lower rank are moved by either pain or pleasure.⁴⁰ “Mankind is [essentially] an hierarchical animal,” Nina Megometov opines, “and the obsessive desire for equality wears the soul out, allows for endless misunderstanding, and perpetual frustration” (p. 65).

The rendering of Nina Megometov as a proponent of classical liberalism and a “relevant” wife and mother who cheerfully supports her husband’s business, founded on exploitation of women, children, and invalids, is yet another biting irony Kimhi presents in her novel. Nina’s beliefs are behind Megometov’s conviction that his deeds are not only acceptable but even humanitarian. “I certainly feel that I saved these children from much worse things,” he says about a group of boys that were transported from Eastern Europe to be enslaved in his expanding sex business. Pointing to one particular child, he continues, “[M]y man found him in some village in the mountains of Romania, primitive parents. They were sleeping in the sty with the pigs. In their shit. They live there, give birth in the filth.” He, by contrast, provides the boys with “first class” accommodations in Tel Aviv (p. 139). That all this happens in an old part of the first “Hebrew city” continues to underscore the novel’s irony: the boys’ abuse takes place behind heavily sealed walls of a rented apartment at an intricate juncture of three major streets named for prominent Zionist leaders—Herzl, Levinsky, and Florentine—known mostly for their utopian vision of the future Jewish state. That this part of Tel Aviv has come to resemble the “neglected stinking margins of Istanbul, Cairo, or New Delhi” (p. 135) strongly suggests that the ideas of classical liberalism have gradually replaced socialist utopian ideals not only in the former USSR but in Zion as well.

In his “Tips for Writers,” the American science fiction author Ben Bova states the following:

In the real world there are no villains. No one actually sets out to do evil. Yes, there are madmen and murderers and rapists and crooked politicians and greedy land developers and all sorts of villainous behaviors. But each of those people believes that he is doing what is necessary, and maybe even good. Every tyrant in history was convinced that he had to do the things he did for his own good and for the good of the people around him…. There are no villains cackling and rubbing their hands in glee as they contemplate their evil deeds. There are only people with problems, struggling to solve them. Just as

your protagonist is struggling to solve her problems, your antagonist is struggling to solve his. It’s all a matter of viewpoint.41

If fiction, as Bova suggests, “mirrors life” or “serves as a lens to focus what we know about life and bring its realities into a sharper, clearer understanding for us,” the portrayal of Chingiz Megometov is an example of what Bova would call “an antagonist, not a villain”—a Russian immigrant to Israel who is determined to use every tool he possesses to better his own life and the lives of the ones he loves (including Ninush) in the face of social, cultural, and economic obstacles immigrants face. Refusing the compromised life that many in the margins settle for, he finds in the “market of carnal love” his best opportunity to prevail in a society that increasingly cherishes American cult figures, wealth, and material accomplishments, even as it still idolizes the muscular body of its Zionist dreams.

Coming from the Diaspora and settling in the heart of the first Hebrew city, Megometov represents a new immigrant with muscles that has become mainstream Israelis’ worst nightmare. Unlike the mass immigration waves of Israel’s early years (mainly Holocaust survivors and Jews from Arab lands), Russian immigrants swept the country with previously unknown attitudes, penetrated well-established cities and towns where they proceeded to build their own neighborhoods. Moreover, while mostly motivated by personal quests rather than Zionist fervor, they were also, as Elana Gomel argues, deeply scarred by a system that promised absolute social and economic equality in return for utter belief in, support of, and loyalty to a centralized authority. Summing up the unexpected rift between native Israelis and Russian immigrants in Israel, Gomel explains that in the 1990s, the former may have expected to find in the new wave of newcomers a reflection of their ancestors’ ardent commitment to the evolving nation only to confront

a stubborn, inflexible, cynical, and supercilious group of people whose emotional identification does not go beyond the boundaries of their own tribe…. The Russians, on the other hand, came to the Jewish State and discovered to their revulsion that they have arrived to a tiny country, Levantine, and irrelevant…. They sought the promised land and found the cafés of Shenkin [Street]. They wanted heroism but encountered hedonism.42

42 E. Gomel, You and Us, p. 17.
Unsurprisingly, Megometov has no regrets. “People are animals. Manure. Garbage,” he contends, adding: “It doesn’t bother me because I make a living off these traits” (p. 63).

8. He Laughs Best Who Laughs Last

_Lily La Tigresse_ does not seek to illuminate the challenges that “Russians” face in Israel, to excuse or defend them, or to confront the rift between them and native Israelis. This is suggested, among other things, by the tragicomical overtones of Megometov’s portrayal. The stories of Ninush and Megometov that we hear in the novel flow from Lily’s semi-conscious mind while she sits in the back of a taxicab on a lonely night journey to a circus performance in a well-known recreational park at the northern outskirts of Tel Aviv. Stuck in never-ending traffic jams caused by security alerts, numerous construction sites, car accidents, a flat tire, the many cars that roam Tel Aviv’s streets day and night, and more, she never reaches her destination. The humor Kimhi interjects into Lily’s chaotic journey blurs the sense of realism the storyline first assumes, bringing to mind the word “carnival” together with the subversive intents that Mikhail Bakhtin put in this term and its derivative “carnivalesque,” while the self-assured female driver, a prototypical “low-class Israeli,” and the commoner’s wit she continues to spout all through the ride evoke the prototypical “Shakespearian fool.”

43 This setting mostly echoes Louis-Ferdinand Celine’s tantalizing novel _Journey to the End of the Night_ (Voyage au bout de la nuit, 1932), with its cynical and nihilistic outlook on human nature, human institutions, and society.44

As Tel Aviv becomes a dark, misshapen body and a “circus” in and of itself, and as Kimhi’s protagonist finds herself caught in a journey navigated by the shrewd driver who nevertheless is also helplessly and hopelessly entrapped in otherwise lustrous Ibn Gabirol Street and Rabin Square, Lily’s own life story of hope and despair fades away and the life stories of the Russian characters that take over her mind assume a subversive role. In the inverted parallelism that Kimhi creates, all veteran Israeli characters from Lily to Amikam to Michaela (the cab driver)—presumably the “masters” of the land—are ensnared in a world that is not of their own making, having nothing left to do but to curse and play a defensive role as the semi-

44 J. Kristeva, _Powers of Horror_, pp. 133–139.
marginalized Michaela does with an overwhelming force in the novel.\textsuperscript{45} The Russians, by contrast, while purportedly stuck in abject realities, either meekly surrendering to their destiny (Ninush) or taking charge of it aggressively and violently (Megometov), project a sense of autonomy that members of the society that rejects them do not possess. Life in the gutter, as Kristeva explains, is self-made and self-designed. Straying is essential for survival:

The one by whom the abject exists is a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist, in a sense, and not without laughter—since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection…the deject never stops demarcating his universe. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray. He is on a journey…and the more he strays, the more he is saved.\textsuperscript{46} 

In the case of \textit{Lily La Tigresse}, Ninush and Megometov are two characters whose lives in the margins ultimately save them from the pulverizing apparatus of Israeli conventions. Surrounded by people from their own land and oblivious to the control of the social and cultural systems which mainstream Israelis must live by and which they neither understand nor accept, pariahs like Megometov and Ninush are left to design for themselves a space they alone can comfortably inhabit in the midst of Israeli society but apart from and oblivious to all societal conventions, criticism, and/or judgment.

9. \textsc{The Animal That Therefore I Am}

Akin to Celine’s \textit{Journey to the End of the Night} as studied by Kristeva, \textit{Lily la Tigresse} is a tantalizing novel that “challenges us vigorously.”\textsuperscript{47} Brimming with cruelty, pain, and defilement that the narrator renders in a matter-of-fact chilling voice, the book is disturbing yet transformational, suggesting, in Kristeva’s words, “a nakedness, a forlornness, a sense of having had it; discomfort, a downfall, a wound. What people do not acknowledge but know they have in common; a base, mass, or anthropologi-

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{45} Michaela is designed in the novel as a prototypical middle-aged “working-class” Israeli woman. Abandoned by a husband who fled to America to make a life for himself, she is left to support her five children while trying to stay attractive and find love wherever she can. As a native Israeli, she is not as marginalized as the Russian newcomers, but her relatively low social and economic status places her beyond the circle of “respectable” Israelis like the Ur-Kasdim clan.
\end{flushleft}
cal commonality, the secret abode for which all masks are intended.”

Contrasting the “deviant” with the “norm” in contemporary Israeli society, the sense of nakedness, forlornness, and discomfort that dominates the novel emanates from the collapse of the imaginary borders that once empowered the main protagonist and then disempowered her, from the loss of the promised earthly paradise she was trained to pursue as a child in contemporary Israel and the egalitarian ideology on which it was founded.

Lily’s relentless pursuit of love and security within the boundaries of conventionalized Israeli society reaches its end when she comes out of the lonely night journey to the circus owning a baby tiger, courtesy of a Japanese ex-lover, now a man in a woman’s body and an animal trainer (rather than a distinguished Yale professor he was groomed to become). Keeping the tiger illegally in her Tel Aviv apartment, Lily becomes an astute observer of the survival techniques the wild animal uses to endure entrapment and satisfy its hedonistic needs. Realizing to what extent human traits resemble the brute and grasping the fundamental need of both species to reduce pain and increase pleasure, she proceeds to satisfy her unfulfilled desires in all the abject places. Turning from the “good girl” in search of love and security she once was into a sex-crazed beast sleeping with random men in trash-filled places, Lily begins to lose “the voice of reason” that kept her “clean and proper” and hear the voice of another form of reason, “a dark one, a visceral one,” which she is convinced has always been engraved in her, as if it were a part of her DNA (p. 217).

The tracing of the tiger that results in the central character gradually evolving into a beastly creature marks a sharp turn in the novel from the perceived realism of its first part to an outright surrealistic fantasy in the second. It is anchored in the often unacknowledged or even disavowed “animal question” of prominent philosophers, such as Descartes, Kant, Levinas, and mainly Heidegger, that Jacques Derrida confronted in what was to become his final seminar series, “The Animal That Therefore I Am.”

Continuing to deconstruct the traditional demarcation of the human—something for which he is well known—in his last treatise, Derrida links together the beast and its sovereign, humankind, for neither animals nor kings are subject to the law: the king stands above it while the beast falls

48 J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 134. See also the review of *Lily La Tigresse* by N. Menhaim: online http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-2895334,00.html.

beyond it. The absence of difference, or shared lawlessness that Derrida observes from above and from below dissolves the distinction, or essential opposition, between animal and human consciousness that humankind, in his view, invented to construct its dominance and, in turn, explains the violent nature that characterizes the different mighty “kings” and powerless “brutes” that surround the narrator of *Lily La Tigresse*. What all the human characters she observes have in common is a set of essentially bestial traits whether they are kings on the top of the mainstream society (Amikam), rulers of its margins (Megometov), or invisible bottom dwellers (Ninush).

10. THE NON-CHosen BODY SPEAKS OUT

According to Kristeva, some of the best works of modern Western literature (those of Dostoevsky, Lautreamont, Proust, Artaud, Céline, Kafka, and others) are anchored in the abject. She contends that it tends to surface when firmly held ideologies begin to collapse and social and cultural boundaries start to break down, opening a thin fissure in the thick walls of conventions through which the primal foundation of the symbolic construct can be noticed.

With the abject front and center in her writing, Kimhi’s unique blend of real-life drama, the grotesque, and the surreal in *Lily La Tigresse* results in a deconstructive piece of literature that reflects, and ultimately subverts, the author’s own story as a woman and as a Russian immigrant who yearns to move from the margins to the center of Israel’s “high society,” trusting that there life will be a pleasure-filled Shangri-La. Yet, it is not just the plight of the author or that of a marginalized woman that is undermined in the novel. Kimhi’s focus is mainly on the fundamental principles of Zionism and its core vision of the Jewish people returning to their ancient homeland and creating there an eternal Shangri-La, that is to say, an earthly paradise for all Jews, a sanctuary where a healthy nation will prosper, divorced from all the ills of the world beyond its walls—as imagined in James Hilton’s 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. In the world that Kimhi constructs, Zionism has indeed produced, literally as well as metaphorically, a new type of a Jew, as Max Nordau and others desired. Alas, the Jewish transformation they dreamt

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50 *The Beast and the Sovereign* is the title of the first volume of Derrida’s works in English published by the University of Chicago Press in 2009.
52 Kimhi uses the image of Shangri-La in *Lily La Tigresse* as a metaphor for a life of happiness and bliss that eludes all human beings (p. 168).
of has resulted not in security, harmony, and redemption, but in Jewish chauvinistic masters and oppressed underlings.

The boom of new voices that have been penetrating Modern Hebrew literature from the margins since the mid-1980s has gone a long way in undermining the potency and supremacy of the “chosen body.” But, as Alona Kimhi clearly shows in *Lily La Tigresse*, the powers of this image continue to sustain the symbolism and national ethos it represents, still hindering the social transformation sought by her and like-minded authors.