



Oded Nir. *Signatures of Struggle: The Figuration of Collectivity in Israeli Fiction.* SUNY Series in Contemporary Jewish Literature and Culture. Albany: SUNY Press, 2018. 296 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-7243-0.

Reviewed by Adia Mendelson-Maoz

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Commissioned by Barbara Krawcowicz (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

Oded Nir's *Signatures of Struggle* presents a new account of Israeli literature through the prism of a Marxist cultural critique. He argues for a relationship between literary and socioeconomic changes by taking the narrative of the spread of global capitalism to describe certain moments in Israeli literature. Nir's approach challenges three dominant concepts in the history of Israeli literature. The first is reading the history of Israeli literature as a narrative of national independence. The second is the post-Zionist vision that focuses on the shift from national to non-national or anti-national literature, and the third is the role of identity politics that casts the history of Israeli literature as a struggle of minority groups.

According to Nir, the interrelationships between the prevalent idealist and ideological narrative of national independence so typical of the historiography of Israeli literature and the Marxist narrative of the spread of global capitalism can best be captured with Frederic Jameson's and later Slavoj Žižek's concept of the "vanishing mediator." This reductionist concept embodies three moments that can be defined in terms of their means and ends. The first is an explicit goal. In the case of Israeli literature, the goal is emancipation or national independence; the second moment introduces new means to accomplish this

goal while replacing previous nonfunctional ones. In the case of Israeli culture, Nir describes the social forms of capitalism that were appropriate for a developing economy. In the third moment the original goal vanishes, and what is left is a new socioeconomic infrastructure. In the case of Israeli culture this corresponds to capitalist neoliberalism.

One central characteristic of the vanishing mediator is a misidentification of these changes. This is what Nir finds in the post-Zionist narrative, which reveals the rifts and contradictions in the hegemonial concept of the nation-state. He shows how the narrative breaks down in post-modernist writings, yet it "forces discontinuity or eternal non-identity on the same subject matter (and thus, still, Zionism and statehood become each other's complement again)" (p. 30). Nir argues that the identity politics that dominate contemporary readings of Israeli literature apply solely to explicit appearances of race, gender, and class, while his theory "accommodate[s] the antagonistic coexistence of multiple interpretive codes or levels" (p. 17).

Nir discusses three moments in the history of Israeli literature. He situates the first around 1950, which corresponds to the establishment of the state and the rise of capitalism. The second is

situated in the 1980s with the postmodern transformation and the economic outcomes of the occupation, and the third is contemporary writing and neoliberal society. Nir's reference to these three periods in Israeli literature can be compared to Arie Krempf's 2018 book *The Israeli Path to Neoliberalism: The State, Continuity and Change*, which divides Israeli economic history into four eras: the 1930s to the early 1950s, characterized by the agrarian paradigm; 1950 to the 1960s, associated with rapid development; 1960 to 1980, covering economic independence; and finally the new liberalism from the mid-1980s to the present.

Nir's thesis is appealing, but a successful model is judged by its ability to produce a refreshing and convincing reading of specific literary works. Nir reads a nice variety of literary texts that chart the history of Israeli literature and the three time periods he identifies. I briefly review each of the chapters and discuss his most striking interpretations of literary works.

In the first "prehistory" chapter, Nir discusses Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* (1902) and S. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh* (1949). Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh* serves as portal to the first moment in his argument. Nir considers that this novella, which is one of the pillars of Israeli literature, to be a "dramatization of the encounter between the *halutzic* imaginary, based on transformative labor, and the challenge that it cannot come" (p. 58). Hints of this chasm appear at the beginning of the text, when the narrator cannot recall the event. The broken narrative also relates to the lack of clarity surrounding the mission and the soldiers. Numerous scholars have noted the descriptions of nature in the novella and the contradictions between nature and the soldiers' conduct. Typically, this contradiction is considered to depict the soldiers as intruders while emphasizing the Palestinians' deep connection to the land. This view fueled the severe criticism of the soldiers' violence. Nature is also the point of departure for Nir's interpreta-

tion, which takes the landscape descriptions as indicative of the *halutzic* imaginary that conjures up tranquility for the narrator and other soldiers at a certain time. The story makes it clear that this imaginary cannot be maintained at the same time as national emancipation that demands conquest and expropriation. Nir argues that "the *halutzic* imaginary is doomed right from the start" yet at this stage this failure is still repressed (p. 61).

In the second chapter, Nir relates to utopian projects that turn into utopian compensation. He discusses the conflict between the individual and the collective that led to such works as Yigal Mossinsohn's *Way of a Man* (1953). In the third chapter, he continues to describe the breakdown of the *halutzic* to better understand the birth of a new genre, which shifts from realist-utopian writing, and thus proffers individuality and subjectivity instead of the national ideology. Nir reads Hanoach Bartov and Yehudit Hendel as examples of this change. Nir focuses on the ruptures, rifts, and nostalgic loss in Bartov's *Each Has Six Wings* (1954) and Hendel's *Street of Steps* (1955), elaborating on elements that appear in previous analyses of these texts, which are usually perceived as indicating a certain disenchantment with the national endeavor. As with Yizhar's novella, Nir ascribes new meaning to this distress and its aesthetics, claiming that "the dissolution of realism corresponds to the end of the autonomous, self-governing settlement project, and the integration of these settlements into something like a national economy" (p. 107).

The next chapters deal with the literature of the 1980s and the second moment of Nir's argument, where he discusses postmodernism at length by drawing examples from Orly Castel-Bloom and Yehudit Katzir as "allegories of the dissolution of the social imagination" (p. 140). Nir claims that the disorientation of Israeli literature and the rise of Israeli postmodernism in the 1980s and the 1990s stem from the context of the post-1967 war, which involved the proletarianization

of the Palestinians at the hands of Israeli capital. While the historical argument of the impact of the Israeli economy is a solid one, its relationship to literature written in the 1980s in general is puzzling. Nir argues that David Grossman's *Smile of Lamb* (1983) fails to present the reality of the occupation but only depicts different voices that do not form causal or analogical connections in the novel. He claims that Yehoshua Kenaz's *infiltration* demonstrates the impossibility of framing a social and historical moment and discusses the rise of Batya Gur's detective novels. In these readings, Nir points to a crisis of social imagination, which is a failure both to create a "correct" map of the social space and to draw a positive picture of the collectivity in the future.

The two final chapters discuss Israeli fiction and neoliberalism and reference such contemporary writers as Einat Yaker, Ofir Touche Gafila, Ron Leshem, Lilach Netanel, and Yiftach Ashkenazi. Here Nir puts forward his claims concerning contemporary Israeli literature and the crisis of social imagination and devotes scholarly attention to works that have not been extensively discussed in academic writing. Nir correctly shows that existing historiographies of Israeli literature fail to define contemporary post-postmodernistic trends. Contemporary writing, he claims, reflects a "growing preoccupation with time and history [which] signal[s] a kind of deeper change, in which the what has previously been perceived as a new freedom—from national time and from knowledge"—has been transformed into a loss of history, "that gradually floats into literary consciousness" (pp. 237, 238). Whereas in the post-modern context writers were unaware of this failure, contemporary writing poses it as a problem, but the solution is still out of reach such that texts fluctuate between the real and the symbolic. Whether readers are convinced by Nir's full account or simply use some of his reasoning as a new perspective on Israeli literature, the final sections of the book constitute interesting directions that challenge previous thinking and leave the

reader with a whole set of new questions as to the future of Israeli culture and the road this literature will take.

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