

## **Images of the Mother Figure in the Amos Oz Canon.**

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This essay is the first examination in English of the portrayal of the mother figure in the writing of Israel's most celebrated and greatest living author Amos Oz. Through a reading of several of Oz's novels and short stories, the essay will argue that the anti-motherhood theme permeates Oz's gender constructs in many of the works of fiction he has produced, and is part of a more general campaign of reinforcing negative and conventionalised views of women.

In her groundbreaking book *Sexual Politics* Kate Millett declares that: "As we all know, it has been open season on mothers for some two decades" (Millett 1971: 336). In her analysis of misogyny in literature Rogers posits that the twentieth Century has seen the increasing tendency of male authors to attack motherhood and concludes that: "The most significant new development of recent decades has been the undisguised attacks on woman as mother." (Rogers:1996, 230).

Often is the case, that in the Amos Oz canon, the invented familiar image of an uncaring mother is of one who rejects and abandons her child. In Oz's fictional mother representations, the mothers are neglectful and incompetent not because they are career women who have chosen to work out of the home, and thus driven to leave their young alone. Rather, they are either stay-at-home mothers who for some unexplained reason seem incapable of bestowing love and care for their children, or mothers who forsakes their offspring, figuratively and literally, for self-serving reasons. A related concern is the author's praxis of withholding pivotal information to explicate his heroines' behaviourist aberrations, instead resorting to old clichés to imply that it inherently female to act so. Invariably, the author skews the mother/child dyad by snapping the biological and emotional ties innate in that relationship, and never pauses to explore the emotions involved or the psychological mechanics that propel that situation. On the other hand, the

fathers are established as antonyms to the mothers. Aschkenasy observes that the mother in Jewish tradition is "...often seen as ferocious and capable of betraying her innate and maternal instincts of love and compassion for her offspring" (Aschkenasy 1986: 93). She further adds that it is most often only the mothers who are portrayed as faithless and treacherous (Aschkenasy: 93).

The attack on motherhood is ossified in *My Michael* (Oz 1991) through the figure of Hanna Gonen, and underpins Oz's treatment of the central heroine as a whole. Early on in the novel, following the birth of her first son, Yair, she suffers from complications, does not attend the circumcision ceremony, and remains in hospital for ten days (Oz: 58-63). Fuchs argues that:

...Hana's sickness is an excuse, a physical manifestation of her psychological rejection of her son which becomes clear when Hana becomes well again. For although she is able to take care of the baby, she tends to neglect him. Hana's sickness...may also be interpreted as a metaphorical expression of her mental sickness-namely, her maternal dysfunctioning (1987: 78).

Indeed, Gertz offers a similar assessment, writing that Hanna experiences Yair's birth as that of death, and fails to establish any kind of a meaningful bond with him (1980: 45). During the pregnancy, she intentionally refrains from describing her feelings in becoming a mother for the first time, and in her diary entries virtually ignores the actual birth. Apart from a few general statements describing her physical condition, the pregnancy is dealt with fleetingly, especially when compared to the attention her dreams and mundane occurrences receive. Yair's birth is reported in this matter-of-fact description "Our son Yair was born in March 1951." (Oz 1991: 57). Hanna depicts before us the pregnancy and the birth- two immensely significant emotional and physical episodes in her life- in cold and passionless terms.

Soon after she returns home with the baby, she reveals her lack of love and warmth for her newborn: "Sometimes when the baby cried and Michael was out, I would get up barefoot and violently rock the cradle...as if my son had wronged me. I was an indifferent mother during the early months of my son's life..."(Oz: 67). Later she

confesses, "...at times I imagined perversely that it was I who had wanted to get rid of the baby...I owed nothing to anyone, not even to this pink, healthy wicked child. Yes, Yair was wicked." (Oz: 67). It is important to recognise that this behaviour cannot be simply dismissed as Post-Natal Syndrome, as the absence of affection and nurture for Yair remains constant throughout the novel. In fact, Michael notices her lack of love for Yair, and implores her to try, as hard as it may be, to love the child- an emotion normally innate in every mother, "I'm nothing special, Hanna, but you must try as hard as you can to love Yair...I have the feeling that you're not wild about him."(Oz: 122).

When Yair hurts himself falling down the stairs she bandages the wound without looking at his face (Oz: 75), and her violent outbursts against the child border on the pathological. She tells us that she would beat Yair viciously if he displayed a tinge of independence: "I would thrash him, without looking into his grey, calm eyes, until panting, I succeeded in wringing the sobs from his eyes. His will power was so strong that it sometimes made me shudder, and when his pride was finally broken, he would throw me a grotesque whimper which sounded more like an imitation of a crying child (Oz:88). At the dentist she forcibly sits him into the chair, even though he shows no resistance to do so, as is to be expected of small children (Oz:175). Moreover, she seems incapable of taking delight at his maturity or intelligence. Thus, for example, when he shows curiosity at the Dentist's medical tools she is repelled by such an interest, and oddly concludes that a five year old with such an inquisitive mind will develop into a disgusting boy (Oz:176).

Similarly, when Yair exhibits emotions of joy, she disapproves of him being happy, seemingly unable to share in his happiness. Repeatedly, she is unable to answer his questions, either because of their complex nature or her impatience, and directs him to Michael, who is always willing to cultivate Yair's precocious intellectual growth. It is for this reason and others, that Yair feels alienated from his mother. Eventually he becomes aware of his mother's inability to meet the challenge of nourishing his active mind and

providing cognitive stimulation as his father does, "You just say things without thinking about them...Daddy takes care what he says and he doesn't talk from his thoughts. Only from his brain."(Oz: 154).

Contrast this with the loving bond formed between Yair and Michael, and the portrayal of the male as the one devoted parent in the family. Thus, if Hanna is one of the most flamboyantly neglectful and self-centred mothers in Israeli fiction, Michael is undoubtedly one of the most committed and dedicated fathers to appear in Oz's stories. I wholly agree with Mazor who observes that: "One of the most central motifs in the novel is that of the father." (Mazor 1988: 176). So, if we juxtapose Michael's and Hanna's care for the boy, the result is twofold: First, we bring into focus Hanna's flagrant neglect of Yair; Second, we expose Oz's one sided portrayal of his heroine as the 'bad' mother.

As a matter of fact, Michael's parental affection and treatment of Yair during his infancy elicits rare praise from Hanna: "I loved my husband when he spread a white napkin over his grey jacket, washed his hands and carefully lifted our son"(65). or "...I realised my husband had learnt how to warm milk in a bottle inside a saucepan of boiling water, to feed his child, and lift him up from time to time to make him burp so that the wind should not be trapped inside him"( 88). Also, when held by Hanna, Yair in his infancy, would scream and turn red, stopping only when handed over to Michael, who would soothe him by singing to him- further accentuating the emotional distance built between mother and child as a result of the lack of maternal love and care. It is of note that whilst Hanna would strike Yair at the first sign of insolence, Michael never raised his hand against the child (88), instead unceasingly answering the boy's questions in his calm and relaxed manner. In order to nurture and develop Yair's penchant for sense and logic he begins to amass a stamp collection for him, despite Hanna's taunts that he is doing so to satisfy his own infantile pleasures ( 96-97). Later, he succeeds in attracting Yair to this hobby, triumphing over Hanna's abnormal lack of parental desire to enrich her child's mind.

Given the history we already have of the relationship between Michael and Yair, it is no accident that Yair inherits from his father a sense of reason and sensible scepticism, in addition to a similar style of explanation and facial expression- a likeness Hanna frequently notices: "Michael had taught Yair to end whatever he has to say with the words 'I have finished'. Michael himself sometimes uses this expression" (87). ; "The child's style of explanation closely resembled his father's" (188). ; "Yair's brow wrinkled like his father's when he was thinking out complicated thoughts." (89). ; "the other children had been rather upset by the cruelty of the Egyptians...Gonen, on the other hand, had questioned the division of the Red Sea. He had given a rational explanation of the rise and fall of the tides" (202).

Oz further highlights Hanna's shortcomings by homologously shading in the tight-knit relationship between Michael and his father- a relationship which is in synchronous opposition to that between Hanna and Yair, and comparable to that of Michael and Yair. To give but one example. On their second date, Michael chooses to speak about his father, the financial sacrifices he made for his son's education, and the high hopes he held for him which Michael continuously strove to fulfil.

It is abundantly clear that in *My Michael Oz*, for all his literary subtlety, casts the mother as the negative force in her child's growth and unashamedly casts the father as the antithesis of the 'bad mother'. He intends his female protagonist to be seen as a cold and uncompassionate mother whose incapacity to love her son is intended to symbolise motherhood.

The motif of maternal deficiency, desertion, and its deleterious effect on the child resurfaces in the novella *The Hill Of Evil Counsel* (Oz 1993b) where in instance after instance, it is the father, Hans Kipnis and not the mother Ruth, who is uncannily glorified and shown to be the paragon of parenting as well as the primary caretaker in the family. Time and again, it is Hans, never Ruth, who soothes Hillel with a lullaby when he suffers an asthma attack, "During the night, the boy woke up again with an attack of asthma.

Father came in barefoot and sang him a soothing song..."( 7) ;"At night he would wake up with attacks of Asthma...Feverish, suffocated, he would...burst into tears. Until father appeared holding a small flashlight, to sit on his bed and sing him a soothing song"(16). Like Michael Gonen before him, he patiently answers all the boy's queries, tempering his responses with restraint and thought so as not to corrupt the young mind, and continuously provides affection and care, "At times he would ask an intelligent question of his father, and he always received a considered reply"(27). In fact, Hillel resembles Yair Gonen, in his precociousness and love for his father, "Hillel suddenly felt an ecstatic, overwhelming love for his father."(34) ; "Daddy , I've got something to tell you...I've got a Shilling that I don't want at all...I just want you to take it"(40).

There exists a connection between *The Hill of Evil Counsel* and *My Michael* in that both cases portray mothers who are secluded in their worlds of dreams. Moreover, as they are too self-absorbed to bestow on their children the essential dose of motherly love required, they relinquish their familial role and leave it to the fathers to assume the upbringing of the children. Hillel seeks his mother's attention throughout the story, but she is immersed in her longing for her childhood and youth in Europe and desires to escape the reality of the newly established state. Altogether, she denies him the contact he craves for: "At other times he buried his face in his mother's dress, demanded to be cuddled, and then, embarrassed at seeing her eyes fill with tears, returned silently to his game"(27). In retrospect, Ruth is viewed by the adult narrator with some ambivalence, for while she is seen by him as beautiful and enchanting, she also constitutes a memory of pain and betrayal (Aschkenasy 1986: 27). According to Gertz, it is this failure by Ruth to endow Hillel with the mothering and guidance he needs, that results in the child looking for protection and warmth from the father (Gertz 1980: 168) Gertz further posits that it is Hillel's fear of his mother and love of his father that accounts for the detailed description of the father by the narrator in the novella (168).

All told, however, the ultimate betrayal of Hillel by Ruth takes place at the High Commissioner's Ball to which the Kipnise's are invited. It is there, that Ruth runs away with a British Admiral, selfishly abandoning her family to escape the harsh milieu of Israel to which she has refused to become accustomed to. Without a pang of conscience, Ruth ups and leaves, and in doing so, shatters her son's reality. It is reasonable to argue that it is this act that drives Hillel to attempt suicide "Come down, Mommy will come back and it'll all be like before. Those branches aren't very strong. Get down...But the boy would not hear...he gathered himself and leaped up to the last leaf, to the shore of the sky" (Oz 1993b: 59). The inescapable conclusion one reaches is that Ruth's leaving with the womanising and lascivious Admiral is a morally bankrupt act- especially when considering that her cause for abandonment is obscure and unconscionable- a general dissatisfaction with the country. As Aschkenasy observes, "Ruth...is seen as a mother only, but as such she manifests the "negative" aspects of motherhood"(91). The fathers, on the other hand, are portrayed with a fusion of admiration and love by the author. (Shaked 1985: 78).

The sense of the mother who is not too interested in her child appears elsewhere as well. The very next novella *Mr Levi* (Oz 1993b) presents the reader with a similar scenario. Mrs Kolodny, Uri's mother, is adumbrated with a striking similarity to Ruth, and although she does not leave her son literally, she does so figuratively. Like her counterpart, she is constantly in a melancholic, brooding mood, unhappy with her surrounding and flees the social reality around her by retreating into a cocoon of romantic dreams. Mainly, she spends her time lying on the sofa, plagued by the headaches brought on by the heat, or shouting at Uri for demanding her attention( Oz: 112). It becomes increasingly evident that insofar as Uri is concerned, his upbringing is to be done by his father, and the neighbours Mr Nehamkin and his son Efraim, with whom he spends most of his time.

In sum, Ruth and Mrs Kolodny may be seen as an all-purpose metaphor for the mother figure who, as Yudkin states, "...gives expression to the sharpest discontent...It is the woman who articulates the daemonic and the hostile, or in general terms, 'the other' "(Yudkin 1985: 154). Even further, the mothers and fathers symbolise the bipolar dichotomy reflected in the novel, which delineates the male figures as rational, intellectual and nationalistic, concerned mostly with the upbringing of their children, and the women, who drown in their romantic daydreams and are oblivious to the needs of others.

The recurring subject matter of desertion, which hovers to some degree over most of Oz's work, is revisited, if to a lesser degree, in the final novella, *Longing* (Oz 1993b). The narrative takes the form of a series of letters written by the cancer-stricken Dr Nussbaum in his final days, to his former lover Mina Oswald who has left for New York. The letters trace their relationship, the historical developments in Palestine before the war and Nussbaums's conversations with the neighbour's child, Uri. Yet in view of the thread that runs through other tales, it is not surprising to find, again, the spectre of a mother discarding her child seemingly in the interests of self-regard and careerism.. At one point in his memories of their affair, we are told of an illegitimate child born to Nussbaum and Oswald, whom she has left in some Kibbutz in the North of Israel before leaving for New York to continue her research "...you have borne me a child and lodged it in one of the Kibbutzim in the valley.."(Oz 1993b: 144) ; "But my love and fears are directed desperately-forgive me-toward the darling child you bore me and hid away in a Kibbutz in the Jezreel valley. What lies in store for him?"(158). Typically, any elaboration on the reasoning for such a decision is visibly absent from the account, depriving the reader of any insight into the personal reasons that led Mina to put her child in a Kibbutz.

Oz limns similar terrain in his first novel, *Elsewhere Perhaps* (Oz 1973) in which maternal rejection and abandonment reach their crescendo. As background to the pivotal events of the narrative, we are made aware at the very outset by the prescient narrator



(who represents the collective voice of the Kibbutz) of the treacherous act by Eva Hamburger: "Noga was twelve and Gai was about three when Eve left her husband and children and married a tourist, a relative, her cousin Isaac Hamburger, who had been spending three weeks with us that summer. It was a sordid affair" ( 7). Eve's perfidy is reported, ironically, in a chapter titled *A Remarkable Man* which exalts Reuven Harish's virtues as a father. The story intentionally juxtaposes Eve's comportment with Reuven's dedication to his siblings, so as to strikingly illustrate the differences between the two.

And indeed, Reuven is the epitome of the good father:

Towards his motherless children he displayed a discreetly moderated devotion. See him walking in the evening...with Noga on one side of him and Gai on the other, stooping to catch everyone of his children's words, even their most idle chatter...Reuven is careful to remain close to them, without trampling on their inner thoughts and feelings. He exercises a father's authority and a mother's attentive love. Moved by his love for his children, Reuven began writing children's poems ( 10-11).

When it is rumoured that Eve may one day return to her family, the narrator echoes Kibbutz member Fruma Rominov's judgement that it would be better if this never occurred (12). After all, Reuven has "redoubled his love for his children" (12 ) and admirably fulfils the void created by Eva's leaving, making wooden toys for Gai or drawing pictures for Noga (12). Oz constructs a form of male motherhood which recurs repeatedly in his plots, whereby the female's function as a mother is not only truncated, but often expunged, either as a result of her disappearance or death. Thus, maternal traits are ascribed to the male, who like Reuven, is portrayed as a modern day Mr Mom, forced to assume parenting duties because of female neglect: "Reuven Harish goes with his son Gai to the children's house. Before lights out he amuses the child by reciting some of his poems. Then father and son chat for a while about stamps and tourists...A kiss, a strong hand gently stroking a mop of blond hair, good night, good night"(39-40).

Conspicuously absent are any concrete psychological or social reasons to explain Eva's behaviour, implying that she is just another incarnation of the selfish mother, so long fostered by misogynous literature. Oz does not provide the reader with any

information as to why this beautiful, energetic and practical woman decided arbitrarily to one day suddenly get up and leave. Furthermore, there is no direct or personal *cris de coeur* from Eva to her children, or any regret during all the years of separation from them - expressions which would partly coat her decision with a patina of moral acceptability. Reflect, that Oz has frequently employed this technique-withholding information and failing to equip his heroines with any plausible reasons in justifying their relinquishment of responsibility in an effort to portray the abandoning mothers as heartless and self-centred.

More puzzling about Eve's elopement is Reuven's revelation to Noga that when Hamburger first visited the Kibbutz her mother despised him: "When that wretch Hamburger came, your mother loathed him. I'm not exaggerating: she loathed him...your mother hated him...I looked after him most of the time because your mother didn't like to be near him...Make him go away tomorrow, your mother said that night, make him go at once" (123-124). Why Eva left with this lewd, obscene man is alluded to in copious references sprinkled throughout the novel in which Eva attempts to exculpate herself by writing of her desire to "purify Hamburger" of his suffering (159) - an explanation Reuven understandably dismisses, instead, believing that Eva's running away was caused by infatuation and madness( 124). Siegfried, Eva's emissary to the Kibbutz, advances the outrageous proposition that Eva's departure from her children's lives was done out of a concern to protect them and "...avoid damaging their impressionable minds"( 288). Fuchs suggests that "...one is left to deduce that Eva is merely rationalising a self destructive urge to join her evil cousin and abandon her good husband. The narrator does not emphasise Eva's materialistic proclivities, but he does allude to the material aspect of Eva's attraction for Germany..."(1987: 68).

A defining moment in Eva's characterisation occurs when from the seedy night-club she jointly runs with her husband, she dispatches the conniving Siegfried to her former Kibbutz on order to entice Noga to come and live with her. Siegfried uses the allure of

Germany's baroque and romantic scenery in his attempt to lure Noga away, an appeal which drew her mother there and which Eva hopes will inveigle Noga. One however has to doubt Eva's motives, in light of Siegfried's plan for Noga, which, as it is implied, has Eva's backing: "Imagine: a girl, a Jewish girl, a pretty, well built Jewish girl standing on a suggestively lit stage, holding a submachine gun and trampling on an enemy soldier in torn uniform who writhes and grovels and kisses her feet. It'll send them wild"(Oz 1973: 222). Siegfried even has the temerity to claim that it is Reuven who is the cause of Noga's troubles, and argues (as Eva and Hamburger do) that morally and legally he has forfeited the right to influence his daughter's future in light of her affair with the much older and married Ezra Berger which results in her falling pregnant with his child( 288).

That Eva should guilefully attempt to snare Noga away from her home, indicates her lack of moral rectitude and is best summed up by Bronka: "But what need is there for a go-between? Perhaps you can explain to me. Why can't Eva write to Noga directly? And why was it necessary to ignore Reuven Harish and get at his daughter behind his back? After all, isn't he her father, and doesn't decency demand that he be consulted about such a decision?"(287). In the end, Eva's scheme is foiled by Herbert Segal, who persuades Noga to remain and marry her young boyfriend Rami Rimon, in an awkwardly tacked on *deux-ex-machina*. Significantly, it is a man ( Herbert Segal) who takes hold of the reins and acts like a father figure to both Noga and her brother Gai.

The vitriol and hostility expressed against the mother in *Black Box* (Oz 1993a) by her offspring is unparalleled in other Oz narratives, and may be the apotheosis of the author's antimotherhood tracts. Among several of its motifs, one of the central premises of *Black Box* is the incompetence and the portentousness of a parent's ineptness,(namely the mother), in influencing the future conduct and evolution of a child. Let me propose that this narrative, proffered Oz with an opportunity to conjure, for once, a positive image of a single mother who successfully rears her son without the involvement of a male figure. Instead, we are presented with animus against the heroine that knows no bounds, and

which further serves to illuminate the author's obsession with depicting maternal flaws and failures. Ilana Brandsetter, as other female characters before her, functions as the proverbial scapegoat: the mother who deprived her son of parental love and thereby caused his antisocial behaviour and psychosexual inability to form normal human relationships.

Divorced by her husband, Alexander, because of her extravagant and manifold adulterous episodes, Ilana joins her sister in the kibbutz but six months later decides to leave and return to Jerusalem, sans her eight year old son Boaz. It is then that the theme of abandonment, and the devastating effect the separation has on a child denied maternal care re-emerges. Boaz grows up to be an illiterate, violent boy, who is constantly in trouble with the law. Fond of referring to his mother as a whore, he expresses much resentment and spleen towards her whenever he deigns to speak with her. To give but one example. When Ilana comes down to his boarding school after he assaults one of the teachers and is about to be expelled, he refuses to see her: "Well, I went down there at once, but Boaz refused to see me. He merely sent a word that he didn't want to have anything to do with that whore" (4). Visiting Ilana and her second husband Michel, he responds to Michel's scolding of his behaviour by insulting Ilana: "And you let that thing fuck you every night"( 3) revealing his sheer contempt and loathing. From his commune in Zikhron he writes to Michel of Ilana's first visit, "We saw it when she came to visit. 100 percent normal she's never been, but now she dropped down maybe below 50 percent" (177). At the same time, Oz has Ilana herself acknowledging her maternal shortcomings "I would never make a good mother, I said" (138).

Why did Ilana allow Boaz, whom she describes as being disciplined, controlled and almost timid as a child, become a teenager simmering with hate and bitterness, who resorts to violence on any occasion he does not get his way. As with other tales, Oz does not expound on the psychodynamics which motivate his female protagonists to exhibit such inadequacy and insouciance in the upbringing of their children. It is for this reason,

and others, that the reader is left to conclude that it is an inveterate female trait to be an unfit mother. Moreover, as Nevott points out, Oz forgoes internal logic in the text so as to construct Ilana as the conventional neglectful mother- For if one bears in mind that Ilana is a woman who possesses such self-awareness so as to so eloquently bare her soul, it is difficult to understand why she allowed her son to transform into a petty criminal and an illiterate (Nevott 1987: 6). As is most often the case, the author never probes this question.

Ostensibly, Ilana re-initiates communication with Alex, seven years after their ignominious divorce because of her problems with the wayward Boaz, and more specifically, his disappearance, "I'm writing to you because I don't know what to do"(Oz 1993:4). Later, however, she reveals that her plea for assistance was merely an excuse, an opportunity to resume their love and hate relationship, "My real motive for writing those two letters in February was a desire to place myself in your hands"(41-42). It is reasonable to argue, therefore, that the resumption of correspondence with her ex-husband, was not out of concern for Boaz's welfare, but a scheme to enliven her mundane, suburban life- an act which ultimately symbolises her entire turn as a mother.

Characteristically, it is the male figure that assumes the parental role; here it is Michel, who becomes Boaz's surrogate father. He succeeds where Ilana fails- gaining the respect and trust of Boaz, to the point where the young man opens up to him, revealing his needs and wants. For instance, he helps in placing Boaz at Telamim Agricultural High School (3); arranges bail for him when he is arrested for possession of stolen goods( 9); finds him a job through a personal friend, and carefully manages the money Alex sends, administering small sums for Boaz whenever he requests it (28). Through the letters, we witness Michel's tolerance of Boaz's outbursts and his exercise of a dose of stern fatherly love which the boy so desperately needs. Sensitive to Boaz's yearning to become independent, he allows him to go his own way piecemeal, coupled with tough moral supervision, constantly rebuking him for his illiteracy and deportment when necessary.

He also encourages him to follow in the orthodox ways of Judaism by peppering his letters with biblical quotations and advice, all the while earning Boaz's affection, "I am fascinated by the way my husband and your son...are silently fond of each other" (78). Michel, this "human diamond" (as Ilana writes of him) is also the perfect father for Yifat, his daughter with Ilana. Like her counterpart, Hanna Gonen in *My Michael*, Ilana praises her husband's ardent care and total devotion to their child:

When I got home...I found Michel asleep on a mattress at the foot of Yifat's bed, fully dressed and with his shoes on. His glasses slipped onto his shoulder...It transpired that in the morning, after I had left...on a sudden suspicion he had taken her temperature, and it turned out he was right. So he decided to call and cancel at the last minute the meeting he arranged with the deputy minister of defence, a meeting for which he had been waiting for almost two months (156-7).

Also Rahel, Ilana's sister, realises that it is Michel who is the most emotionally capable of the two to deal with Boaz, "Don't touch him, Ilana. If there's any necessity to get involved again, leave it up to Michel to take care of it"(18). Afterwards, when Ilana writes to Rahel, making it clear that she still carries a torch for Alex, Rahel cautions her of repeating the same mistake she made with Boaz, leaving him in the Kibbutz, lest Yifat is psychologically scarred as Boaz was, "Just try to understand that if you don't stop yourself now, Yifat will grow up exactly the same...What is it that drives you to throw away everything you have for the sake of something that doesn't and can't exist"(115).

Another plot device aimed at sustaining the further attenuation of female textual space is the killing of the mother at the start of the novel, or indicating early on that the protagonist's mother is dead. This diegetic strategy of depopulating the narrative of a central maternal female figure creates the necessary void for the father to assume and play a prominent role, as well as allowing the author to foster an idiotperative exploration of the father/son theme or, rarely, the father/daughter theme. At the same time, the heroine is muzzled, eternally silenced, her voice drowned out so that it is the male player that is entrusted with conveying her thoughts, and filling in crucial parts of her background and character. In this context, it is in *To Know A Woman* (Oz 1992a) that

the suppressing of a woman's voice reaches its fullest expression. In the opening pages of the novel, Ivria is killed off in a never deciphered accident or suicide. This provides the point of departure, for after Ivria vacates the scene, Oz is able to focus completely on Yoel's attempts to come to terms with his daughter's problems and illness and resume his duties as a father, this time of course as a sole parent. This praxis is also very much in evidence in *Fima* (Oz 1994) where the infinitesimal references to the eponymous hero's mother, who died when he was ten, take place when she appears in his dreams or in fragmented recollections. In *Black Box* (Oz 1993a) the oedipally structured narrative of a father-son conflict is brought to the fore by the apparent suicide of Alex's mother, when aged five. Other examples of sons who lose their mother early in their life include Michael in *My Michael* (who lost his mother when he was three, and cannot even remember her face), Uri of *Strange Fire* and Emmanuel Orvietto of *Don't Call it Night* (Oz 1995). In that same book, the principal female protagonist Noa Dubonov is also raised in a single household, having lost her mother as a child.

It is imperative to point out, that an extended reading of Oz's fictional construct of mothers, reveals an additional plank to this mosaic- namely, that even when there is a mother figure present, she is extremely marginalised, while her child is tropologically 'adopted' or 'adopts' other parents (Zilberman 1994: 29). Zilberman cites *Sumchi* (1978) Oz's only children book to date, as a fine illustration of this plot structure. Here, the mother is very much relegated to the periphery ; Rather it is Mr Inbar, the father of Sumchi's female friend, Esti, who for Sumchi "...serves as the model for a kind of masculinity which is tolerant and egalitarian"(Zilberman: 26), and for whom Sumchi develops a genuine admiration. For example, after running away from home, he is taken in by Mr Inbar, and the two engage in a pseudo-political discussion, with Inbar perceptively refraining from treating Sumchi like the child he really is- a gesture not unnoticed by Sumchi: "It felt good in this room...deep in an interesting and honest, man to man talk with Engineer Inbar. How amazing that Engineer Inbar did not did not

scold or mock me, but simply pointed out that we disagreed. How very much I loved the expression 'disagreement' and Esti's father, as much as Esti and maybe even more (Oz 1978: 66-68). This experience can also be seen in *Fima* (Oz 1994) where Yael, a career woman (in a rare nod to Feminism) often leaves her son Dimi with her ex-husband (the eponymous hero), who becomes the boy's substitute father. Consequently, while her son feels alienated from her, a meaningful bond emerges between the two, and it becomes increasingly evident that Dimi sees Fima as the only one he can turn to. Thus, when he kills a stray dog, it is Fima, and not his mother, he feels he can trust to tell (Oz 1994: 32-135). Elsewhere, Fima yearns to adopt Dimi, believing that Yael is far too busy to care adequately for the boy, and scolds her for not spending enough time with him (234-6, 239). The comparison between Fima's love and care for the boy and Yael's indifference is intensified in the many expressions of love for Dimi salted sweepingly throughout: "He...took Dimi's hand, feeling that he too was close to tears and that he loved this weird child...Fima's body ached with the desire to snatch the sobbing creature up from the arm-chair and squeeze him to his chest with all his strength...a desire stronger than any he had felt for a woman's body in his life" (129-131). As such, Dimi articulates echoing sentiments: "Say Fima, you need a child, don't you? How'd you like it if we went away together? We could go to the Galapagos Islands and build ourselves a cabin out of branches" (135). More to the point is the lack of passages depicting any instances of love or bonding between Yael and Dimi, underscoring the contrast the author wishes to draw between Yael and Fima.

Finally, in *Strange Fire* (Oz 1992) we encounter for the first time in the Oz cannon, the figure of the patriarchally rooted diabolical mother, who intentionally sets out to harm her child. Needless to say, no apparent psychological reasons to explain her malevolent behaviour accompany her actions. The nucleus narrative of *Strange fire* evolves around the attempt by Lily Danenberg to seduce her prospective son-in-law, Yair Yarden, while her daughter is out of town. On the night that she is to meet with Yair's



father to prepare a guest list for the forthcoming wedding of her daughter, Dina, she sets out to tempt her daughter's fiancée into a sexual tryst, surely aware that this may sabotage her daughter's future marriage. She begins the night planning her insidious gambit to lure the young man to the last detail, leaving for Yair's house shortly before his father is due to arrive, "In exactly seven minutes, Yosef will ring the doorbell of my house. His punctuality is beyond doubt. At that precise moment I shall ring the doorbell of his house on Alfasi Street...And Yair will open the door to me" (114)

Reaching Yair's house, she uses the pretence that there is something she needs to "straighten out"(118) with him, luring him out of his home to join her for a walk. The young man, uncomfortable and bewildered, reluctantly agrees, but soon realises that he has made a mistake, sensing that Lily is prevaricating about the real reason for their conversation, "Yair began to scratch the lobe of his ear uneasily. What's the matter with her? what's she up to? There's something about her that I don't like at all. She isn't being sincere. It's very hard to tell" (122). Soon afterwards, she rattles her future son-in-law with the revelation that she was once married to his father, maliciously savouring the effect this confession has on him, "He stared into the darkness, deep into thought...Yair began to follow her northward, lost in thought. And she was filled with savage joy"(126). Sensing that he is overwhelmed by her disclosure, and no longer able to contain her desire, she uses this moment of weakness to continue her erotic seduction, stroking and caressing the back of his neck and hair. While he finds her touch comforting, he is acutely aware that Lily is not being truthful about the real purpose of their walk, "Yair was thinking: That's enough. Let's go home. What she told isn't necessarily true...What does she want? What the matter with her? Time to put a stop to all of this and go home." (129). Ultimately, Lily succeeds in her entrapment of Yair, with the final act of betrayal taking place in the Jerusalem biblical Zoo; but what is more disconcerting is that Oz does not expound on Lily's motives, which could possibly have provided the stunned reader some plausible justification for her moral turpitude.

The troubling question is why does this forty-two year old divorcee, tall and thin, who "...could easily claim to be seven or eight years younger..."(113), choose her daughter's fiancée as her prey of seduction when she could as easily have picked some other man. The narrator ironically adds that she does not hide her age as it against her moral principles (113)- an attribute that is incongruous with her behaviour that night. Here, the reader is forced or seduced to assume, that what is motivating Lily is a perverse desire to deny her daughter marital bliss, or more specifically, persuade Yair that Dinah and/or marriage is not the route he must traverse. Thus, at first, she speaks of the efforts required to prevent a marriage collapsing, intimating that after the initial months of physical pleasure, "infuriating habits come to the surface, on both sides"(Oz: 129). When Yair assures her he and Dinah will survive those tribulations, she cunningly tells him that she is only speaking in general terms, and goads him to put his arm around her shoulder. It is however, in the pivotal scene that follows this exchange that Lily reveals her stratagem, " I think you should know for example, that Dinah is in love with your outward appearance and not with you. She doesn't think about you. She's still a child. And so are you"(130). In the early 1965 Hebrew version of the story she says: "Dinah is like me. She is very sensitive. She is not like your outgoing girlfriends. She is very poetic...We'll see how you'll entertain Dinah. If you bore her, things will become bad"(168). Incredulously, Lily rationalises the incitement against her daughter as beneficial guidance which Yair must be made aware of, "Lily Danenberg is sure that the things she has said to Yair Yarden are "educational"(Oz 1992: 130). It is clear, that in the guise of concerned advice, Lily tries to rupture the bond between Yair and her daughter, all for the sake of a short-lived fling and an unwillingness to repress her unbridled concupiscence.

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