
The Materiality and Embodiment of Violence: Ronit Matalon's Poetics of Responsibility

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Volume 21 Issue 2 (March 2019) Article 8**Shiri Goren,****"The Materiality and Embodiment of Violence: Ronit Matalon's Poetics of Responsibility"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss1/8>>

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Abstract: In her essay "The Materiality and Embodiment of Violence: Ronit Matalon's Poetics of Responsibility" Shiri Goren discusses Matalon's novel *Bliss (Sarah-Sarah, 2000)* as a complex and bleak account of domestic and political decline. On the backdrop of the first Intifada, a Tel Avivian marriage falls apart and a lifelong powerful and intimate friendship between two women ends abruptly. In another geographical location and slightly different timeframe, early November 1995, a French-Jewish family prepares for the cremation of one of its sons, who died of AIDS. Rejecting potential interpretations of national allegory, Goren argues that one of the foundational assumptions of the novel is that the realms of political public trauma and personal calamity are ultimately not far apart. The harsh outcomes of violence become entwined with intimate, personal stories and are expressed in every realm of private and public life. The metaphor of malaise and the physical disintegration of the private and social body in Matalon's narrative reflect both the internal and external experiences of living in Israel during such troubled times. Matalon's poetics, Goren suggests, aims at mapping brutality and inquiring into the origin and anatomy of violence both in and beyond the Israeli context.

Shiri GOREN

The Materiality and Embodiment of Violence: Ronit Matalon's Poetics of Responsibility

Introduction – Creative Resistance

The overwhelming sense of powerlessness, so widely experienced by Americans in the past two years as a result of a new political administration's arbitrary policies, is anything but new to Israelis. Israeli woman author Ronit Matalon, whose premature death in December 2017 left the local literary community in shock, has often discussed the consequences of living in such a fraught political environment. Matalon's clear and lucid voice was unique in the intellectual and public atmosphere of contemporary Israel, particularly with regard to questions of political and social dissidence:

There's this kind of atmosphere here, in which more and more authors are afraid; a certain thought, a fraction of thought, emerges every time they speak. This fear to speak up is what scares me the most. The worst type of censorship is self-censoring. When I talk about politics I express my belonging to this place, my caring, my concern, in the most profound way. Criticizing or expressing discomfort is what stands at the heart of being part of something, of belonging to something. In each and every part of my being, I am part of this place. If I had lived anywhere else, I would have been dead inside. [Living] Anywhere else is not an option. (Izikowitch)

This interview with Matalon was published in October 2016, prior to the US presidential elections. Although the author spoke about the difficulties of criticizing the existing political regime in Israel and her belonging to the Israeli locale, one could easily apply her astute observations to the political and social atmosphere on the other side of the Atlantic. As a considerably visible public intellectual, who was never in the business of pleasing her audience, Matalon often pointed out moral lacunae and faced severe criticism for her positions.

For her readers, Matalon's writing was anything but cuddling. Already in 2010, literary scholar Tamar Hess, argued in an introduction to a special issue of *Prooftexts* dedicated to the author that "Matalon is one of the most well-read and intellectual authors Hebrew literature has produced since Lea Goldberg, and thus reading her work is an experience at once demanding and complex, but also rewarding"¹ (Hess 241). Indeed, Matalon was a woman who, in a highly male-dominated society, insisted on bluntly presenting piercing political criticism and harsh truths. Her integrity on issues of ethnicity, gender, race, identity, family, intimacy and politics became a trademark of her prose. Her exquisite self-reflexive writing style experimented not only with different registers of language and literary genres, but also with visual components such as photography, art and even with excerpts from other authors, which then become part of her own narratives.

Matalon's poetics drew on a wide variety of theoretical sources. In regard to theory, Hess explains, Matalon's writing displayed "deep awareness of post-structuralist and neo-Marxist thought." Her stories not only integrate selections from essays (as from Jacqueline Kahanoff's writings in *The One Facing Us* [*Ze im ha-panim eleinu*, 1995; English, 1998] George Steiner's autobiographical *Errata in Uncover her Face*, [*Galu et pane'ha*, 2006] or her own essays about the first Intifada embedded in *Bliss, A Novel*

¹ To date (Sep 2018), and although it includes only three articles and the introduction, this is the most comprehensive collection of essays published about Matalon's poetics, in any language. A special, posthumous issue of the Hebrew literary journal *Mikan*, dedicated to Matalon's writing is forthcoming.

[Sarah, Sarah, 2000], but also maintain an intimate exchange with Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, among others. But it is not this deep engagement with theory that mainly characterizes Matalon's writing style. Hess' careful analysis of Matalon's oeuvre (in 2010) stresses that, "While Matalon's prose hosts a wide variety of texts and voices, her fiction can also contradictorily be described as literary autarky, offering its stories while simultaneously producing a self-reflective gaze of interpretation. Story and meta-story are woven, one into the other, and seemingly render a critical view of them redundant." This, in essence, summarizes the intellectually and emotionally challenging, yet highly rewarding, experience of reading Matalon's unique poetics. Hess' nuanced reading then also provides one potential explanation for the considerable delay in the Israeli reception for Matalon's work, at least outside of literary circles. Sophisticated and bold Matalon's writing seems to resist interpretation. Yet her intricate prose, spanning several literary forms, continues to be relevant for understanding Israelis in the twenty-first century.

Since her earliest stories, Matalon worked to create a dialectical criticism of personal experience in the country.² Matalon's unique poetics intertwined fictional and real events to create poignant depictions of individuals, close friendships, intimate relationships and family dynamics, as well as their homes, and other spaces, which are often considered private. Fredric Jameson's dialectical criticism insisted on proceeding from the abstract to the concrete, on striving to reveal obscure effects of class struggle in any given text by reconstructing the historical conditions that yielded it (Jameson 1981; Tally).

Matalon's version of dialectical criticism of personal experiences aimed to create informed, self-aware prose that offered poignant political and social commentary. In situating the political predicaments within personal narratives and internalized experiences, Matalon provides a unique perspective and insight on recent and long-lasting public crises in Israel. Her fiction offers, in essence, an alternative reading of crisis.

Not just that: creative writing offered Matalon an effective mode of intervention in the political and moral crises themselves. Her writing differs from other politically engaged Jewish-Israeli authors in both content and form. As the close reading of her second novel will demonstrate, Matalon was unique in the intensity and strength of her poetics, as well as in the diverse intellectual and theoretical sources she draws on. This multi-layered intellectual, emotional and social sensitivity to a variety of ethnic and political tensions meant that as an author she could not be placed into traditional categories or classifications. Her feminism did not obscure the sharp and effective political criticism, nor did it frame her ethnic and racial awareness. Her writing has become, to borrow from Marianne Hirsch's analysis of Grace Paley, "an effective medium through which to communicate, in symbolic form, complex intellectual insights into the social, intellectual, and psychic roots and by-products of militarism and war" (Hirsch 1768-9).

According to Matalon, *Hamatzav hayisraeli*, the Israeli political and social state of affairs, entails a ubiquitous brutality, which leads to suffocation, overwhelming ugliness, and literal and figurative decline. The Israeli occupation of the west bank and Gaza, in the words of the author, is a matter that "cannot be taken lightly. It manifests daily through infinite forms of brutality" (Beker). Matalon was one of the first, and most persistent moral voices against the occupation, and writing became the tool through which she conveyed her criticism. For Matalon, writing served as a proclamation of needs, desires and expectations that defiantly articulated and justified the deep fears and helplessness that the Israeli political crises created. Her novels and non-fictional prose, which constitute the end result of this exercise—this creative resistance—provide a space in which these observations and fears can be experienced and expressed, and in which the repression of these fears can be undone (Hirsch 1773). At stake, therefore, is the application of literature as a form of defiance, reaction and intervention – indeed dissidence – against policies and actions of existing political establishment. To put it bluntly, Matalon's writing, long before Post- and "Post-Post Zionist" scholarship created a practice of activism and mechanism of resistance, and it proved a model for scholars and intellectuals both inside and outside Israel.

"A Stance Toward Biography"

Before her sudden death at the age of fifty-eight, Matalon authored four novels, two long novellas, a collection of short stories, a collection of essays, an epistolary novel, a play and a children's book, as well as numerous essays and newspaper articles. Born in 1959 to Jewish parents who immigrated from

² I thank this essay's anonymous reviewer for suggesting to think here of Matalon's poetics along Jamesonian lines.

Egypt and the youngest of three children, Matalon grew up in the township of Ganei-Tikva, on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Literally translated as "Hope Gardens," this blue-collar township functioned for the author – through the hardships of her childhood – as a source of creativity. Unlike traditional Zionist accounts of immigration to Israel, Matalon did not view migration as a new beginning. Rather, and much like transnational authors of the new millennia, she perceived the generation of her parents and their move from Egypt to Israel, as an emotionally complex continuum. For example, she began by tracing the migration experience at its origins instead of its destination. Her writing thus concerns itself with Levantine culture, specifically, the range of possibilities, or in some cases, *the illusion of possibilities*, that the Levantine culture represented for the parents' generation. However, having grown up in Israel, Matalon had often noted her inability to fully and authentically describe those conflicting sentiments.

As mentioned earlier, the author's unique literary voice is characterized by meticulous language and imperturbable, non-sentimental and anti-nostalgic depictions of characters and situations. Her writing style is highly intellectualized and extremely calculated. The aesthetic tendency in both her fictional and non-fictional work amounts to what Ian Watt calls in his distinguished work, *The Rise of the Novel*, the "particularity of description":

The concept of realistic particularity in literature is itself somewhat too general to be capable of concrete demonstration. [...] Two aspects suggest themselves as of especial importance in the novel – characterization, and presentation of background: the novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualization of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment. (17-8)

This quality of careful calculation in the craft and style of Matalon led Nili Mirsky, one of Matalon's former literary editors to argue:

The most striking element in [Matalon's] stance as a storyteller is her sense of responsibility: the responsible focusing on the burnt edges of the world" as she calls it. [...] this responsibility, it seems to me, forms the basis for Matalon's reluctance to use anything that is even remotely related to a cliché. She deconstructs stereotypes and does so as gently and meticulously as a watchmaker. (149-50)

Such self-awareness towards language and the deliberate and careful selection and arrangement of every word in her novels became a major aspect of the ethics of Matalon's writing.

To demonstrate my arguments and delve more deeply into the unique poetics of Matalon, my analysis here focuses on her second novel *Bliss: A Novel*. Unlike other literary works by Matalon, *Bliss* has not yet received a significant scholarly attention, perhaps in part due to the high demands it puts on the reader. Painfully detailing the consequences of the Israeli "state of emergency" politics, the novel creates a bold literary statement, and although it mostly focuses on the 1990's it harshly criticizes the Israeli here and now.

Bliss – Domestic Narratives, Political Consequences

Matalon's novel *Bliss* forms a complex and bleak account of domestic, social and political decline. It begins in 1995 but ultimately spans the years of the first Intifada (1987-1991) and the first half of the 1990s. The narrative follows a secular Jewish family in Tel Aviv and a more traditional French Jewish family in Plessis Belleville, France. In Tel-Aviv, a marriage falls apart and a lifelong powerful and intimate friendship between two women, Sarah and Ofra, ends abruptly. In Plessis Belleville, on the eve of the political assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the first days of November 1995, a French-Jewish family prepares for the Cremation of the body of their son, Michel, who died of AIDS. The gap between these two domestic narratives is partially bridged by the storyteller Ofra, who metaphorically moves between the two broken homes – neither of which is her own.

The chronologies of these two core narratives, however, rarely overlap. The story about Sarah spans the years of Sarah and Ofra's childhood, adolescence and adulthood but centers on the beginning and middle of the 1990s and the complex processes that led to the end of Sarah and Udi's marriage. Among the factors that resulted in the divorce was Sarah's destructive love affair with the Palestinian-Israeli, Marwan. While this partially political narrative story traces the decline of Sarah's powerful and intimate friendship with Ofra, above all, it also offers a realistic depiction of secular left-wing activists in Tel Aviv at the onset of the first Intifada. As already suggested, the second narrative focuses on Ofra's French family and the burial of their son, Michel, taking place a year after Sarah and Udi's separation during a

very specific timeframe. The narrative, in fact, ends on the night between Saturday and Sunday of November 4, 1995, with the grave news coming from Israel of the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin.

Defying or eluding simple allegorical interpretation the novel juxtaposes political public traumas with personal calamity. The metaphor of malaise and the physical disintegration and decline of the private and social body in Matalon's narrative, reflect both the internal and external experiences of living in Israel during such troubled times. Through the domestic sphere, Matalon hauntingly shows how devastating brutalities affect each one of the characters. Such brutalities, the novel demonstrates, transcend traditional divisions that are based on gender, class, ethnicity, educational background or political affiliation.

Ending the novel with a national tragedy, renders the novel into what Oded Nir and Ari Ofengenden term in their introduction to this volume, "a site for forensic investigation." Painfully aware of the inability of language to fully represent the broken reality, the novel continuously replays acts of violence: physical, metaphorical, real and imagined. The fragmentation of the narrative, the rejection of novelistic conventions, the ambiguity of gestures and ideas, and the unreliable narration create a *reading experience of continual crisis*. Typical of Matalon's writing, this poetic style – which calls attention to the very acts of reading and interpretation – places high demands on the reader but, as suggested earlier, also provides her with great rewards.

Bliss, then, acknowledges the physical fragility of human life. Michel's AIDS-ravished corpse, like Sarah's beaten body—which is also portrayed during and following a miscarriage—all stress the material nature of the human body. In other words, in all of these bloody instances, violence is shown to transform real bodies from within the very walls built to protect them. Small acts of brutality also transpire on other levels and scales in the novel: as images in the mind of the characters; as figure of speech; as acts of intolerance in domestic conversation; and as disproportionate physical reactions of a parent to the acts of their children. Finally, the novel also depicts an intervention, brutal in its own way, of Ofra throwing a cup of hot coffee on Sara's face in order to stop her from beating her child. None of these situations of engagement is simple or straightforward. They occur around the confusing and emotionally fraught circumstances of everyday life in Israel. As one of the characters stresses, the political situation should not absolve anyone of personal responsibility: "Don't start up with 'this country' Ofra," he said angrily. "There's nothing I hate more than this blanket doctor's note—this excuse not to be human beings. 'This country' or any other—ultimately, each of us has to decide what kind of person we're going to be" (*Bliss* E. 74; H. 93-94).

The moral ambiguity of the occupation, the novel stresses on several occasions, does not justify other wrongdoings. In the same way, Sarah's moral high ground and the intensity with which she experiences the first intifada, for example, does not release her from responsibility for the irreversible breakdown of her own marriage, or from other brutal acts she is engaged in. A set of parallel metaphors posits the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister as one link in a long chain of brutality and despair. Rabin's murder mirrors the killing of the nine-year-old Palestinian girl, Bosina Hijo, by IDF soldiers during the first Intifada, much as the violence against Sarah and her miscarriage parallel Michel's death and the execution of the family cat. Whether disasters strike the collective realm or individual lives, no hierarchy exists between them.

The novel goes against the grain of the national media language in that it does not give precedence to public experience over private tragedies. For example, the death of the Palestinian girl, and the divorce of Udi and Sarah are as important as the collapse of the peace process and the assassination of the Prime Minister. Personal losses then, are as devastating and significant (or insignificant) as collective ones. Here lies an important critique of and direct resistance to the Jamesonian national allegory (Jameson 1986, 1987; Ahmad).³ For Matalon, the private is not a metaphor for the national – one does not embody the other. Rather, the political and national realities, what at times is termed as 'the Israeli state of emergency,' are affecting – both physically and emotionally – the individuals. The harsh outcomes of violence become entwined with intimate, personal stories and are expressed in every realm

³ Fredric Jameson describes the third world novel as a national allegory. For him, "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society." Jameson, (1986). Jameson later refined the term national allegory following a critique by Aijaz, who persuasively claimed that "if we replace the idea of the nation with that larger, less restricting idea of collectivity, and if we start thinking of the process of allegorisation not in nationalistic terms but simply as a relation between private and public, personal and communal, then it also becomes possible to see that allegorisation is by no means specific to the so-called third world. While Jameson overstates the presence of "us," the "national allegory," in the narratives of the third world, he also, in the same sweep understates the presence of analogous impulses in US cultural ensembles" (15).

of private and public life. Matalon's poetics then aims at mapping brutality and inquiring into the origin and anatomy of violence, both in and beyond the Israeli context.

Bliss comprises thirty-seven chapters, each of which consists of several segments. The chapters' internal structures and the way they progress (or regress) the plot amount to a unique narrative structure, a structure that is typical to other works by Matalon. The organizational principal of her narrative generally favors themes over chronologies, yet as was observed elsewhere, the story is mainly told in retrospect.⁴ Ofra delivers the story as a series of fragmented personal recollections. Neither the chapters nor the segments within have titles or numbers which would otherwise provide more linearity.

The connections between the segments (and often between the chapters as well) initially appear associative but they follow a strict structure. Each segment, whether continuing the topic of the one preceding it or introducing a new subject, always relate to the last sentence of the preceding segment. The linkage is either thematic or associative through a transitional object or character that appears in both segments. For example, one segment ends with the sentence: "At once the room was flooded with red – the walls, the ceiling, the floor tiles, red crude daubs. The sweeping morning sun lit up the red curtain and illuminated everything" (E. 115; H. 142). Following this poetic description, the next segment starts with the matter of fact sentence: "We bought the curtain, Sarah and I, in some store in Nahalat Binyamin. I thought it was awful" (E. 115; H. 142). This excerpt also exemplifies the simultaneous usage of various Hebrew registers. The merging of slang or spoken language [*mahrid*] with grammatically correct and stylized Hebrew [*hutzat bashemesh*] creates a comic effect.

Disintergration Of Relationship

As the Hebrew title of the novel, *Sarah Sarah*, implies, the content of the segments of the "Sarah" narrative revolve around the woman who stands at the center of Ofra's world. For the most part, it is Sarah who sets the tone for their relationship and decides what falls under the title of "best friend." This extreme level of engagement derives from Sarah's strong personality, but Ofra clearly enables and even promotes this role division. As it turns out, Ofra engages in Sarah's life more intensely and with greater dedication than she does with her own life. Yet this closeness conceals a dark, uncanny and in fact unnatural element that suggests the risk of abandoning oneself in the other. As Ofra herself says, the intimacy between the two women confuses "violence with warmth" (E. 182; H. 220). Such an over engagement with the other, the novel suggests, necessarily engenders blind spots or blurriness. These, in turn, serve as another source of brutality.

Aware that she tells the various stories in retrospect, Ofra is nevertheless concerned with questions of responsibility and accountability of her narration. Some scenes are told and retold several times throughout the novel in an attempt to refine the recollections and to make the filtered memories more accurate. This effect, to paraphrase Judith Butler, creates silences or ellipses in the narrative, or, in other words, moments where what is not told become more important than the actual text. Therefore, even events that are not directly spoken of are nevertheless accounted for. In one recurring scene surrounded by ellipses, Sarah meets with Ofra at the airport before Ofra's flight to Michelle's funeral in France. This farewell scene comprises the opening of the novel, yet Ofra returns to it repeatedly throughout the narrative.⁵ For Ofra, this encounter symbolizes a moment of final realization that her relationship with Sarah has ended.

Although the novel consists of a collage of incomplete memories and Ofra constitutes an unreliable storyteller/narrator, she nevertheless strives to portray an accurate and truthful account of the events. Her seemingly postmortem perspective forms an attempt to trace what led to the destruction. When Udi, Sarah's husband, asks Ofra in one of their many conversations, "What was the mistake" "what did I do wrong and when? At which point did I begin to make the mistake worse?" (E. 113; H. 140), the novel does not provide any direct answers and, in fact, avoids mentioning the actual word "destruction" in relation to any of the disasters narrated in the text. Instead, disaster proves to be a signifier with more than one signified. Ofra's euphemism for disaster, "the anguish" (199) [*por'anut* 240], consists both the falling apart of Sarah's family and the collapse of the intense relationship between Sarah and herself. Another possible signifier for the *por'anut* is the political situation in Israel and the characters'

⁴ In a *NY Times* review of the novel Richard Eder rightly observes that Ofra's Tel Avivi story is told mainly in retrospect. It is important to note, however, that when she recounts the visit to France, Ofra begins in the present and moves forward.

⁵ See, for example, Matalon, *Sarah, Sarah*, 7-8, 207-210, 258-259, 266-267, 295-297.

anguish over it. Although the narrative strives to map out and dissect what Ofra terms as "this blow" (11) [*hamaka ha'zot* 19], it is never completely defined. This represents a particularly striking gesture given Matalon's otherwise acute attention toward, and precise detailing of language.

From the outset of the narrative, therefore, the reader learns of the decline and the death of Ofra and Sarah's relationship: "I hadn't seen her for more than a year," (E. 2; H. 9) Ofra confesses before embarking on an extensive retrospective account of their relationship. Literary scholar Hannan Hever argues that the airport scene connects not only the two domestic stories (the Israeli with the French one) but also the personal narrative, presented by Ofra's family, with the national story, alluded to by Sarah's political engagement. According to Hever, the scene at the airport is narrated and analyzed several times in the novel to determine the precise transition-point between the public and the private (Hever 336-7). Hever further maintains that throughout the novel Matalon locates moments of *blindness* or sites of blurriness - in the most figurative sense - that indicate, permit, guide or even create brutality. These moments, when one cannot see, feel, hear or sense the presence of the other, or when one is consciously blind to the other, Hever stresses, embody the source or origin of violence. In this way, the novel forms a highly mature statement on human brutality and its consequences.

The Instability of Truth

Bliss, then, is invested in understanding the intricate layers that interplay and make up the public and the private of the Israeli social sphere, while investigating the origin of brutality. One other element that makes this novel so unique appears in the alternative endings the narrator provides for several of the scenes in the novel. The narrator repeatedly portrayed three major instances, all involved some form of violence or brutality, real or symbolic: Ofra and Sarah's first introduction as children; Ofra's encounter with Marwan after he and Sarah have broken up; and, finally, the untold occurrence of Sarah's beating by either Udi or Marwan, a scene that Ofra, who sees Sarah only after she has arrived at the hospital, has to invent and then re-imagine throughout the narrative. The importance of these scenes lies in their ability to redefine the narrator - Ofra's - reality: namely, how she perceives the people around her and how violence affects and influences her perception, and thereby our perceptions as readers. This form of narration engages its readers by forcing them to constantly assess, probe and reconsider the information given by the unreliable narrator, in order to recreate the reality shaped by the narrative. Each description is slightly different than the next, providing the characters participating in the scenes with various suggestions for identities. At the same time with each additional scene, the reader is confronted with more possibilities for what happened. Here, too, the source of brutality plays a major role in shaping the reader's perception and final assessment of the characters. Did Sarah really go to the clinic to have an abortion? (E. 276; H. 278), or did she have a miscarriage on the living room sofa when she and Udi told their son, Mims, that they are getting divorced? (E. 5; H.11); Has Marwan beaten Sarah in the offices of the organization for foreign workers? Why should the reader favor that account over the one that blames Udi? (E. 96; H. 96); Was it Sarah who called the police the night Marwan was arrested, interrogated and beaten up? (E. 251; H. 300); did the meeting of Ofra and Marwan occur a few weeks (238-239; H. 285-286) or a few months "after the mess"? (250; H. 299). Did Marwan say, to Ofra's dismay that he'll never forgive Sarah "for what she did"? (239; H. 286) Or did Ofra deeply feel for him, sensing that there was a "pact of the unemployed," - "*brit shel muvtalim*" (H. 299) - between those who were no longer friends of Sarah and miss her sorely? And then another question keeps looming, articulated on one occasion by Sarah: "What happened? [...] What happened that was so terrible"? (238; H. 285). The novel does not offer any clear answer to these questions, and instead creates a sense that any account of the truth is relative. Favoring one account over another becomes in and of itself a violent act and in any event proves meaningless. Furthermore, the various options presuming to form tentative solutions or possibilities for redemption, all amount to the same harsh sense of stagnation, emptiness, and claustrophobia: there is no way out of the individual and social condition that living in Israel embodies.

While Ofra actively participates in or witnesses most of the instances she continuously recounts, she is aware of both their shifting meaning and the very instability of the language she uses. In "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes writes: "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader; [...] a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 150). Ofra certainly functions as the reader and interpreter of Sarah's world and the language she uses forms a code. However, every decoding is another encoding. As an emotionally invested reader herself, Ofra extracts meaning by interpreting the scenes she constantly transfers from

one signifier to another, yet she can never absolutely possess their ultimate meanings. The unity of the text remains unstable because the meanings of words, expressions, tropes—at times even entire situations—are not fixed. Tamar Hess aptly refers to this phenomenon in Matalon's writing by suggesting that: "Matalon's stories, as they are told, bring to the surface the multiple possibilities of narration and the paths not taken. They lead us to question if a storyline is, in fact, possible. These exposures may stifle the options of reflection upon them. They paradoxically stand before us almost hermetically inaccessible in their nudity, in their stark self-awareness" (Hess 294).

Matalon thereby creates ambiguity in almost every idea or gesture in the novel. As if following Foucault's concept of the "regime of truth," she cultivates a sense that there is no absolute 'Truth' of knowledge and almost everything is relative, or at least contains two possible interpretations. This democratic, anti-hierarchical element defies the reader's expectations for a chronological and linear narration and neutralizes the need to classify information as relevant or not. This multiplicity of meanings contributes to the creation of the experience of continual crisis throughout the novel. This crisis in form and ways of expression echoes the vulnerability of the text and the narrative, as well as the reading process itself. Ultimately it also forms a grand metaphor for the consequences of living in Israel in such troubled times.

Happiness Behind the Trees: "Israeliness" As A Fatal Disease

The story of the preparation for Michel's funeral is divided into ten segments intertwined within the "Sarah" narrative of *Bliss*. While the "Sarah" narrative stresses the local, the brutality and sense of decline the "Michel" narrative conveys appears global or transnational as it certainly transgresses Israeli borders. Through the agency of her Israeli characters, here, Ofra and her mother, Ines, and relatives with ties to Israel such as Michel, a flight attendant who occasionally comes to visit, Matalon's interrogation of brutality reaches the small French town of Plessis Belleville. Through Ofra's eyes, the landscape of Plessis Belleville seems as appalling as Tel Aviv's: "Of all the townships and villages between Paris and Roussy, Uncle had chosen the most tedious of them all, the flagship—not just of French provincial dreariness but of provincial dreariness in general. [...] A kind of dreariness that was the definitive offering of emptiness [...] the systematic corrosion of mental, verbal, and emotional faculties." (E. 14; H. 182). In fact, as the narrative of *Bliss* unfolds, it becomes clear that existence outside of the Israeli territory does not provide an alternative to flawed life in Tel Aviv.

Matalon first published the story of the French family as a special supplement to *Ha'aretz* in April 1997. The 31-page freestanding novella then carried the title, "Happiness behind the Trees". On the cover of the supplement there was a David Ginton drawing that lent the novella its name (Ginton, panda on paper 101×71, 1985). The transition from the novella to the novel rendered the single, harmonious story into fragments of another narrative, no less intense and artistic. Similarly, the idea of happiness behind the trees becomes a mere illusion, an unattainable goal, which adds irony to the novella's title on the one hand, and deepens our understanding of the novel's narrative, on the other.

A comparison of the *Ha'aretz* novella with its fragmented version in the novel *Bliss* uncovers nearly indistinguishable versions with one striking variation: Matalon changed the name of the cat from "Sarah" in the 1997 version to "Lilly" in *Bliss*. While the obvious explanation of avoiding confusion between the main character of the novel and the cat seems sufficient, this new information influences the entire reading experience of the novel, shedding new and disturbing light on the story of the cat.

Like Ofra, Lilly the cat functions as a transitional character connecting the two main narratives of the novel. Sarah found and raised the cat but a few years later Michel adopted Lilly and took it with him to France. A few hours after his funeral, Ofra discovers that two months before he was hospitalized, the HIV-positive Michel contracted Cat Scratch Fever from Lilly. The disease proved lethal due to his weak immune system, and *ultimately expedited his death* by about six months. Like Michel's body, Lilly forms a symbol for a much larger condition. As Susan Sontag argued in her influential essay, *Illness as Metaphor*, political, social, literary and cultural writings are infused with the usage of illness as a figure or metaphor. Writing in the pre-HIV era Sontag's account ends with a discussion of the metaphor of cancer, but accounts of HIV AIDS neatly align with Sontag's framing (Sontag 3-4).⁶

⁶ For writing about AIDS as a cultural metaphor see, for example, Paula A. Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* and Cynthia J. Davis's "Contagion as Metaphor."

Michel's family members, especially his father, Henri, bear a grudge against Lilly and persecute the animal. While not stated directly, it seems that the cat provides an easy target for the family members to redirect frustration, anger, and grief created by witnessing the disintegration of Michel's body leading to his death. Believing that Henri would end up killing the cat, Ofra constantly tries to protect her. Nevertheless, before leaving for the airport Ofra's cousin David asks her to assist him with "getting rid of Lilly" (E. 260; H. 310) and Ofra agrees. This element deserves dwelling on, as it is not entirely clear what Ofra's motivations are. Like other violent acts in the narrative, there is no clear rationale for joining David. Does she aim to prevent Henri from becoming a murderer by becoming one herself? Is this, as I offered before, a way of redirecting emotions? The novel makes sure to avoid providing any clear answers to these questions.

While David intends to kill the cat from the outset, both he and Ofra use generalized and "clean" language ("help with something," "getting rid of"), which conceals the brutality of the act. With that, the narrative of *Bliss* does draw attention to the details, that is materiality of the killing itself. Ofra and David put Lilly in the trunk of the car, seal the trunk and drive for over an hour to suffocate the feline (E. 260-261; H. 311-312). Moreover, for an Israeli reader, this act of killing by suffocation immediately alludes to initial attempts in the systematic killing of Jews and other minorities by the Nazis during the Second World War. The cremation of Michel's body also bares similar implications, only here the association only exists in the mind of the reader whereas in the description of the cremation, it is an analogy suggested by the text itself. The echoing of Sarah's name in comparing the two versions of the narrative adds an even more disturbing layer to the interpretation of the cat-killing scene, as if hidden brutality toward the human Sarah seeps into the murder of the cat. For example, in one scene, Ofra is shocked to find herself thinking how easy it would be to strangle to death her closest friend, Sarah: "I looked at her thin white neck, slightly bent, smooth and narrow like a roll of toilet paper, easily encircled by the strong fingers of one hand. I was alarmed by the image, by both the vitality and the fogginess of the emotion that gave rise to it" (E. 58; H. 75). Here lies another possible explanation for the Hebrew title of the novel, *Sarah Sarah*, a title that alludes to the human Sarah but also to the cat Lilly/Sarah.

Disintegration or dissolution—of Ofra's French family, of Michel's private body—forms a recurrent trope in the novel. Michel's violent death of AIDS stresses the fragility of the human body. David tells Ofra that: "During the last weeks of his life that thing called his body was a kind of limp bag, an unstuffed taxidermized animal. I don't think I've ever loathed anything in my life as much as I loathed that body" (E. 258; H. 308). Michel's cremation, as his brother Alain testifies, eerily makes the body even more real: "I never felt such a vivid awareness of Michel as having a body until this... ceremony. The fact that it takes fifty minutes to annihilate that body, that there's a measured unit of time, that there are ashes in the end, that you see it – it's not an abstract. You're constantly remembering the body" (E. 241; H. 288). Like the killing of the cat, this annihilation of the human body, brutal to the Jewish eye, evokes the Holocaust. Accordingly, Henri, a Holocaust survivor himself, prohibits his wife, Marcelle, from witnessing the cremation. "I've seen it before," (E. 158; H. 193) he tells Ines while explaining why he can witness the ceremony that defies Jewish tradition yet prevent his loved-ones from doing so.

Michel's AIDS-ravished corpse is not the only body suggesting the physical fragility of human life. As mentioned earlier, *Bliss* also calls attention to Sarah's body after she has been beaten either by her husband, Udi, or her lover, Marwan. Another broken body emerges from Sarah's miscarriage, which likely occurs while sitting on her living room sofa at the very moment when she and Udi tell their 5-year-old son they are divorcing. The narrative makes another such connection to the murdered body of Yitzhak Rabin.

Bliss, then proceeds from the private death of Michel and the murder of the cat to the collective trauma of the political murder. Upon returning to the house after leaving the cat to die on the side of the road and driving David to the airport, Ofra first hears of Rabin's assassination. The unusual wording that her Uncle Henri employs forms the last sentence of the novel: "They've murdered *your* Rabin" (E. 262; H. 312, emphasis mine). The trauma of the assassination directly relates to the general theme of decline and collapse in the novel. Matalon forges a connection between the brutalities before, during and after the Intifada and the violence that took place before and around the assassination of the Israeli prime minister. In this way, the private death of Michel, and by extension the killing of his cat, Lilly/Sarah, directly connects with the national death of the Prime Minister—and metaphorically relates to the death of the friendship between the two women, Ofra and Sarah. The narrative, then, weaves the personal mourning of the family, and of Ofra in particular, with the personal and collective shock Israelis experienced as a result of the political murder.

Hannan Hever claims that the political murder of the private man, Rabin, forms in and of itself a connection between the personal and the national drama as the physical injury of Rabin's body signifies injury to the national Israeli body (Hever 342). Hever argues that the greater and deeper achievement of the novel lies in Matalon's attempt to construct a new literary language through which to depict the connection between private suffering and the violence of the Israeli political condition (Hever 336-337). Matalon's narrative indeed creates the sense that the private home no longer provides shelter from violence in the public sphere, but the next pages will demonstrate that it does much more than that.

In an interview following the publication of the novel, Matalon offers a highly telling observation on the contemporary state of Israeliness:

I think that this touches on the discussion of brutality. Brutality that is present here, with us—with me, with you. All the time. [...] I think that all of our relationships are brutal. We never cease to torture each other. Ultimately everything coalesces into one plague. The plague of AIDS, the plague of Rabin's murder, the plague of politics, the plague of Israeliness. These are all a type of plague. [...] This is how I have experienced Israeliness in the past few years, as a kind of fatal disease. [This is] the emotional climate of Tel Aviv [...] something really terrible has happened to the city in recent years – the suffocation, the overwhelming ugliness, the urban and ecological decline. The "corrupt occupation" is a matter that can't be taken lightly. It manifests daily through infinite forms of brutality. (Beker)

Bliss forms a site that mimics and perpetuates brutality. By concluding the narrative with the public event of the assassination yet framed in these personal, genealogical terms, "They have murdered your Rabin," the novel creates *an imitation of the social atmosphere that allowed for such brutality to occur*. This sad vantage point is the moment from which Matalon initiates the post-mortem that is the narrative. In that respect, the catastrophe of brutality that cuts across territories and blinds moral compass is also the moment of writing; a creative source that feeds the narration.

In conclusion, Matalon's poetics situate the Israeli state of emergency within personal stories and internalized experiences. Through her narrative she comments on the harsh consequences of recent and ongoing social and political crises in Israel. Each and every act of brutality in the novel can be viewed as a product of the virus Matalon described. *Bliss*, then, concerns itself with finding an alternative poetic language to reflect both the internal and external experiences of living in Israel during such complicated times.

One may read the artwork selected for the Hebrew cover of the novel as a good metaphor for Matalon's specific poetic language. It is not by chance that in creating the transition from the novella, "Happiness behind the Trees," to the novel *Bliss*, the art on the cover changed. Ginton's "happiness behind the Trees" – which depicts a figure lying outside, beneath a ficus tree, gaze turned away from another barefoot person approaching – no longer applied. Instead, Matalon and her publisher picked for the cover of *Bliss* a work from a series by British photographer David Spero. Perhaps not coincidentally entitled, *Interior I*, the photograph shows an empty non-domestic hallway, perhaps a passenger gateway in an airport. It displays the rounded beginning (or end) of a flat escalator, a small rectangular air vent, the straight lines of commercial ceiling tiles, and reflections of the inlay florescent ceiling lights on the shiny floor. As in almost all of Spero's work, there are no people in the photograph though the otherwise heavily-trafficked subject of the image causes the viewer to be conscious of this jarring absence.

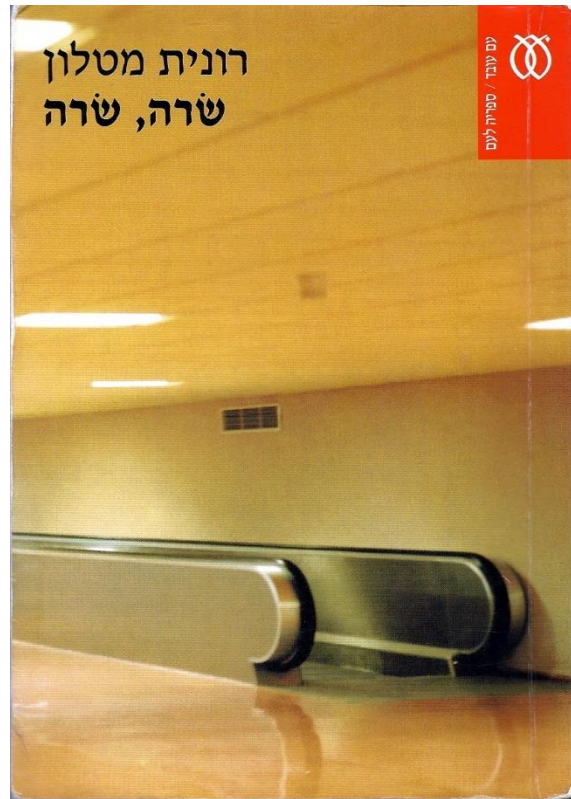


Figure 1: The cover of Ronit Matalon's *Sarah Sarah* (2000), photograph by David Spero

This self-contained corner and fragmented view of the escalator lends to various interpretations. The fact that the spectator cannot see how and where it ends (or begins), together with the emptiness of the room and the similarity of the colors of the floor, wall and ceiling create a sense of uneasiness. The escalator is also a conveyor belt, it endlessly rotates and thereby symbolizes the trope of recurrence and repetition throughout the parallel narratives of the novel as a whole. This uncanny experience also derives from the landscape itself, an indoor public space, which symbolizes transition and in-betweenness and confuses the inside and the outside. Further, by echoing the significant airport scene, which Ofra recounts from the outset and then revisits constantly, the photograph lurks in the reader's mind throughout the entire reading experience.

The enduring ability of Spero's photograph to make the ordinary worthy of contemplation deepens Matalon's poetics. Although the cover image presents a public space, it speaks to the individual, highly personal experience Ofra and Sarah share in the confines of the airport. The Israeli and Jewish homes Matalon presented in *Bliss* also invert and change our view of the relationship between presence and absence, inclusion and exclusion and public and private. Matalon's highly charged novel, like her entire body of writing, consistently draws attention to the social and political context of its poetics. Through the domestic sphere Matalon hauntingly shows how devastating brutalities inextricably tied with outer spheres affect each one of the characters and how this troubling reality has become an integral part of everyday life in Israel of recent years.

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