

Humanizing the Enemy: Transcending Victimhood Narratives in Mahmoud Darwish's and Yehuda Amichai's Poetry

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What is left for one
to do except renounce oneself in joy
donate one's blood and kidneys
donate one's heart and soul to others
be an other's, be an other.
Yehuda Amichai, "Deganya"

Introduction

There is a cross-disciplinary consensus — from theories of social psychology to socio-political ones — that victimhood narratives, in societies involved in intractable conflicts, are abrasive and exclusive, where each of the sides of the conflict conceives the opposite one as an inhuman entity whose story does not deserve to be taken seriously¹. Pursuing the meaning of otherness as it slides into the twisted logic of victimhood implies biases and misperceptions. A discourse of erasure entails the practice of "historical denialism" (Nyhan, Zeitzoff 3) in which one community tends to claim absolute legitimacy of its cause. This usually involves obliterating the traces of the past, by judiciously repressing and deleting chunks of memory narratives or negating parts of historical records.

In the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, this practice is more disadvantageous to Palestinians. Rashid Khalidi contends "it often means that permission cannot be granted for a Palestinian voice to be heard—even on matters having absolutely nothing to do with Israel—without the reassuring presence of its Israeli echo. The opposite, of course, is not exactly true: a Palestinian voice is not necessarily required when exclusively Israeli or Jewish concerns are aired" (*Palestinian Identity*, 146-47). On the Israeli side, "[t]hrough the deployment [of the Nazi holocaust], one of the world's most formidable military powers, with a horrendous human rights record, has cast itself as a 'victim' state ..." (Finkelstein 3). In the face of such

challenges, the praxis of identity formation for the two people is entrenched in exclusionary rather than dialogical discourses.

On the exceptionality of the Israeli and Palestinian victimhood narratives, the prominent Israeli novelist Amos Oz notes, “the encounter between the Arab residents and the Jewish settlers does not resemble an epic or a Western, but is perhaps close to a Greek tragedy. That is to say, it is a clash between justice and justice, and like ancient tragedies, there is no hope for happy reconciliation on the basis of some magic formula” (cited in Coffin, 319). Edward Said, for his part, cautions against the tendency “to isolate your enemy from time, from causality, from prior action, and thereby to portray him or her as ontologically and gratuitously interested in wreaking havoc for its own sake” (“The Essential Terrorist” 154). His claim, “each *is* the other” (Said 1974, 1) finds resonance in Mahmoud Darwish’s and Yehuda Amichai’s poetry which has trodden precisely into this fraught area of self-identification and has, in the process, re-conceptualized the shifting contours of selfhood and alterity. It is interesting to see how two poets who in ordinary circumstances are seen as oppositional in the way they defend their national myths of victimization and survival, have, actually, much in common. They are attached to the same land; they often use similar images of it in their writing; their shared history in it is reflected in what they write. While presumably they should be annihilating each other’s discourse of victimhood, they, at some point in their poetic career, encompass both parties in a mutual discourse of victimization, seeking to discover the humanity that is common to each side even after nearly seventy years of conflict. This article, therefore, attempts to investigate the following questions posed by Michael Rothberg: “What happens when different histories confront each other in the public sphere? Does the remembrance of one history erase others from view? When memories of ... colonialism bump up against memories of the Holocaust in contemporary multicultural societies, must a competition of victims ensue?” (2).

This article mainly aims to study poems that deconstruct oppositional binaries; poems that adhere to a deconstructive logic that suggests that identity, origins, and responsibility need to be put under erasure in order to move beyond the curtailing desire to name and define. The loss of locatable origins that deconstruction opens up is a useful tool for the critique of hegemony. My argument, therefore, is that when identity is seen as that which *becomes* rather than in a fixed, transcendental position, there is more room for understanding and empathy. In studying the deconstructive poetic endeavors by the two poets, it is possible to detect the indeterminacy and slippage this practice brings to identity politics, and to escape the dialectical violence inherent in the dualism of “me” and “you,” “us” and “them,” “right” and “wrong.” The trajectory of this article, consequently, is to trace the proposal that the boundaries between victimizer and

victimized are not only blurred, but subverted altogether. By calling into question the typical attitude toward the hierarchical ordering of binaries, readers can arrive at new understandings.

In Palestinian literature and collective imaginary (folk culture, religion, and the performing arts), the presentation of the Israeli is entrenched in vicious and violent discourses. He² is guilty for ethnically cleansing the Arab Palestinians, causing unprecedented misery and destruction. He is also responsible for fomenting hatred of Muslims and eventually for stoking up nationalist feelings. He is the archetypal oppressor and diabolical Other whose greed and duplicity constantly nourish Palestinians' fear and hatred. As for the Palestinian Arab, he is the victim of dispossession, social genocide, and historical injustice. The Nakba is a decisive caesura of his history that continues to shape his collective memory and determine his sense of identity. A quick glance at post-Nakba Palestinian literature confirms this attitude; the narratives strikingly "bring to the fore the brutality of dispossession and exile" (Brenner 11).³

In Israeli literature and collective imaginary, on the other hand, the Palestinians have been devalued and dehumanized. They are culturally undermined and portrayed merely as figures of darkness and obscurity who live on the wrong side of history.⁴ They are made discursively absent, ("a land without a people for a people without a land" being one of the most oft-cited slogans in Zionist literature), and hence relegated to states of stereotypical and fetishistic fixation. Symbols of both alterity and enmity, merely "Present Absentees," without agency and therefore voiceless, Palestinians are subject to incremental prejudice. Israelis who have for long been governed by a culture of fear, fueled by political, social, cultural, and educational channels, learn to hate Arabs because convinced that Arabs hate them. The perpetual cycle of hatred, untrustworthiness, and anger feeds into Israel's collective imagination and catalyzes further animosity and conflict. This explains why, to most Israelis, Palestine remains a war zone and not a nation with history and significant culture. The Palestinians and their sufferings are almost invisible; consequently, they are written off history and relegated to the margins, as the focus has always been on the Israeli tragedy instead of the universal tragedy of war.⁵ Israeli literary narratives also stress the idea of victimhood as an inherent constituent in the Israeli identity.

Having learned to apprehend "the other," Israelis and Palestinians perceive each other as eternal enemies. This complicity, notwithstanding its monolithic, radical, and hostile nature, is more articulated in their exclusive reliance on the victim subject position to make claims for their territorial rights. Entangled in a dialogue over historical justice and national legitimacy, the two parties of the conflict compete over the "exceptional" victim label. "Tragedy [is] an inseparable part of Palestinian identity," notes Khalili (103);

accordingly, the Palestinians position themselves as the exclusive legitimate claimants to victim status (based on the historical claims of the illegitimate, military act of land dispossession, the ensuing Exodus, and the denial of the right to return), taking the Nakba as the originary moment of national loss. Israelis too confer on themselves the position of *the* exceptional victims, an exceptionality that they root in the exceptionality of the Holocaust. The Nakba is “the ultimate trauma of Palestinian victimhood, just as the Shoah constitutes the ultimate trauma of Jewish victimhood in the modern age” (Caplan 5).

In the “victims *versus* victims” conflict, all forms of compromise or reconciliation seem obsolete. David Shipler discusses how these stereotypes are ironically similar: both sides base their rhetoric on a “chosen trauma” that explicates and interpolates their sense of victimization. And in order to be a victim, Shipler says, “[y]ou have to create a picture of the enemy as a huge monster” (166). Such stereotyping practices on the part of Israelis, Shipler elaborates, are “prevalent enough to infiltrate many levels of discourse, from the mundane conversation to the carefully constructed political analysis, from the graffiti on lavatory walls to the highest-ranking general’s testimony before a Knesset committee. Phrases, epithets, images flicker through the daily lives of Israeli-Jews like stray bullets that whistle and whine and wound” (228). The “syndrome of victimhood” that feeds collective imaginaries in times of intractable conflicts gives legitimacy to both Palestinians and Israelis to be “righteously vengeful” (Suchet 169). If, as Staub and Bar-Tal advance, “[g]roups encode important experiences, especially extensive suffering, in their collective memory, which can maintain a sense of woundedness and past injustice through generations” (722), both the Holocaust and the Nakba stand as inimical traumatic events of paramount importance in the collective discourse of victimization.

Like thousands of Palestinians who were forced to exile in the aftermath of Israeli occupation of historical Palestine starting from 1948, Darwish was severed from his homeland and became subject to constant placements and displacements. He was exiled since the age of six and aspired, once a poet, to become the chronicler of the Palestinians’ experiences and emotions – expressed or repressed –, endowing his poetry with a power that is “national and cultural, spiritual and material, aesthetic and informative” (Sylvain 138). Darwish’s poetry is local, without losing its universal touch. Its subject matter is himself and his people, but also all those politically and socially oppressed “others.” His sense of humanity seems to constantly restore hope and love even when under the worst forms of subjugation and confinement. “Under Siege” is among many of his longer poems that blends the self to the other and attempts to reclaim a human, universal sense of calamity and human tragedy. Almost epic in its length, “Under Siege,” published in Arabic in 2002 (translated into

English in 2010), carefully mirrors a particular moment in the Palestinian Israeli conflict (the second Intifada/Uprising of 2002) with much poetic sensibility and journalistic precision. The fragmentary nature of the poem – untitled clusters that flow without apparent logic or rationale – reflects a poetry written “under siege,” urgent, fleeting and unfulfilled. Yet, it is a poetry seeking to break the siege, by providing a historical *mise-en-abîme* to the national and personal forms of survival available to Palestinians, and by devising an aesthetic counter-narrative of protest and reclamation of identity, besieged by master hegemonic discourses.

If Mahmoud Darwish sought to break the siege with his poetry and believed in poetry’s power to transcend cultural and historical binaries, Yehuda Amichai wrote with a sensibility akin to faithful humanism, protesting injustices and vulnerabilities when necessary, and condemning a false rhetoric of enmity. His poems are universal manifestoes of love, war, childhood, and politics, translated from Hebrew into most languages of the world. For Chana Kronfeld, “Amichai’s oeuvre—like Brecht’s and Auden’s—offers an unrelenting critique of the dominant ideology of its time” (2), engendering an empathetic affinity for all those whom Walter Benjamin has described as the vanquished of history,⁶ those who fall prey to dehumanizing systems of violence and exclusion. Amichai’s poetic egalitarianism is evident in his attempt to break down socially constructed binary divisions and to become “an other” without erasing the self. “Jerusalem” and “An Arab Shepherd Searches for a Lamb” are two important poems in this regard, the first taken from the early collection *Shirim 1948–1962* and the second from *A Great Tranquility: Questions and Answers* (1980); two poems that enact the subversive dislocation of perpetrator/perpetrated identity rhetoric. However, it is important to note at this juncture that Amichai remains one of the most well-known poets of the “Statehood Generation” writers who, like Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua and others, acknowledges *de facto* the national sovereignty of the Israeli state. Amichai, nevertheless, still tries to accommodate a space for the Palestinians whom he considers an integral component of Israeli sovereignty, through his universalist notion of citizenship that judiciously effaces all traces of a blatant racial and national conflict.

Daniel Feierstein postulates that binary thinking which characterizes most of Jewish and Arabic literature, “requires each case of genocide to have one and only one victim and one and only one perpetrator” (68). While this might hold true for the Israeli side, the reality is more complex and complicated for Palestinians. Indeed, the latter’s perpetrator is both internal and external. Palestinians were betrayed by Arab states before being manipulated by the British, and this makes their trauma more insidious and profound. Khalidi explains: “Israel and Zionism are only part of a vast concatenation of forces including Britain, the

United States and the Arab regimes, which has conspired throughout this century to deprive them of self-determination, and ultimately of their very land and homes” (“Fifty years after 1948,” 10). Admitting this complexity does not completely blur the binary way of thinking that propounds that one group must be intrinsically either perpetrator or victim. To detect and deconstruct the inherent fallacy of this exclusionary paradigm, one has to agree with David Marr that “[t]he only truth in history is that there are no historical truths, only an infinite number of experiences, most of them quickly forgotten, a few remembered and elaborated upon by bards, novelists, philosophers, priests, filmmakers, and, of course, professional historians” (Marr xxv). This attitude about the relativity of Truth, and by the same token, that of victimhood discourses is embraced by both Darwish and Amichai.

Darwish’s dissonance from the mainstream literary discourse of victimhood is played out through providing counter-narratives that humanize the Israeli enemy, challenge orthodox and conservative Arabic discourse, and pave the way for a new era of sympathetic Israeli literary images in Arabic literature. In “Under Siege,” in addition to evoking Palestinian suffering and displacement – as in traditional Arabic literature –the poet also evokes the Jewish history of diaspora and genocide. In other words, he attempts to underline human issues of common interest for the two sides of the conflict, thus foreshadowing the political agenda of his literary work. As for Amichai, his immense popularity, and his being generally acknowledged as Israel’s most important poet and one of the writers who have shaped modern Hebrew literature, do not prevent him from interrogating the falsity of binaries in relation to victimhood discourse. On the one hand, he re-adjusts both positions of victimizer and victimized, by acknowledging the “enemy’s” own (hi)story and favoring peaceful co-existence. On the other hand, by exposing the shared trauma and pain of war, he humanizes both oppositional parties. At times, he instrumentalizes religious narratives to advance his argument.

Mahmoud Darwish: “I don’t love you, I don’t hate you/ My feelings are not your concern.”

Darwish’s poetry is pluralistic both in its subject matter and formal aspects. He refuses to monopolize history and memory, and calls instead to stop fighting about the past: “Let each one tell his narrative as he wants. Let the two narratives make a dialogue, and history will smile” (18).⁷ He never succumbed to cheap nationalism and chauvinism or resorted to vilification of his oppressors or the usual jingoism so common in political art and literature. He was aware that his oppressor too is human and he honed the prospect of a cultural

coexistence with the “other.” In “Under Siege”, written while he was himself under siege in Ramallah, Darwish reckons both with the Israeli occupation during the second Intifada of 2002 and with the hopes of Palestinians in this moment of national calamity. The poem, Patrick Sylvain maintains, harnesses the poet’s “sense of humanity that seems to constantly restore hope and love even when Israeli tanks and aircrafts are pounding Ramallah, Gaza or other occupied territories” (139). “Under Siege” uses a plethora of tropes to transcend the binary of victim and perpetrator, the first of which is the trope of hospitality. The poet has a deconstructive take on this trope as he confers on the speaker the role of a “host.” Hospitality, after all, is a virtue of Arabs, and its condition presupposes a culture of tolerance and acceptance. While in the collective memory, Israelis are the trespassers, strangers, violators of Palestinians’ land, the speaker welcomes the intruders, obliterates their enmity for a moment, and treats them as human:

You there, by the threshold of our door
 Come in, and sip with us our Arabic coffee
 [you may even feel that you are human, just as we are]
 you there, by the threshold of our door
 take your rockets away from our mornings
 we may then feel secure
 [and almost human]

We may find time for relaxation and fine art
 We may play cards, and read our newspapers
 Catching up on the news of our wounded past
 and we may look up our star signs in the year
 two thousand and two, the camera smiles
 to those born under the sign of the siege. (21)

It is quite a classical schema for enemy forces to show up on Palestinian doors for routine check-ups or arrests. Their appearance is both unexplained and unquestioned. The encounter is usually shrouded in hostility as it implies intrusion on the part of the Israeli soldier and vulnerability and exposure on the part of the Palestinian. In the poem, the tension is absent. The demarcation lines between friend and foe are blurred – evidenced in the use of a non-national “we,” a mix of “self” and “other” – and structures of personal contact enter into conflict with Manichean structures of the other (the conflation that occurs gradually between the “you” and the “we” evidences the process of “becoming” rather than “being”). The encounter is itself an empowering act, necessary, Magdalena Zolkos states, to rescue the victim from his victimization. She explains: “While victimization is produced by the obliteration of social proximity of perpetrators and victims, and the consequent obliteration of their status, the face-to-face encounter restores the moral and social subjectivity of the victim” (31). While this subjectivity is usually exacerbated within a reality of

political and cultural authority based on the denial of the other, the proximity encouraged by the victim bestows agency and power.

Ostensibly, the performative force of the encounter and the proximity it ensues (sipping coffee, playing cards, reading the newspaper) destabilize invader and invaded alike, whose subjectivities “come into existence ... through the exposure to [each] other” (Alford 154). At the liminal space of the “threshold,” the invitation to “sip coffee” announces a break from the chaos and fighting that characterizes the life of besieged Palestinians and the Israeli besiegers. At this moment, their ontological identity that freezes them forever in proximity to weakness or power simultaneously is deconstructed. However, the speaker’s hospitality and welcoming, clear in the invitation to sip coffee (so emblematic of Arab generosity, with the symbol of coffee as both a spatial and identity marker) are in the Derridean sense both “conditioned” and “conditional.” Hospitality, Derrida contends, hides – of necessity – a sense of hostility: “it gives, it offers, it holds out, but what it gives, offers, holds out, is the greeting which comprehends and makes or lets come into one’s home, folding the foreign Other into the internal law of the host” (7). The performance of hospitality, to reiterate, is fundamentally manipulative and empowering. Derrida explains: “It does not seem to me that I am able to open up or offer hospitality, however generous, even in order to be generous, without reaffirming: this is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home, without any implication of ‘make yourself at home’ but on condition that you observe the rules of hospitality by respecting the being-at-home of my house, the being-itself of what I am” (Derrida 14). As such, Darwish undermines the host-status maintained by the state of Israel that views the Israelis as masters of the land of Palestine. He plays with the roles of the host and its perennial Other, the guest: he reverses them, dilutes their rigid foundation, convulses the cores of their categorical constructs, and renders their ideological peripheries ductile. Therefore, the speaker’s welcoming, albeit open and direct, is tinged with sarcasm and irony and acts mainly as a succinct reminder of who really owns the place. No wonder, somewhere else, Darwish would say: “It is time that you left/ Live wherever you wish but not among us/ It is time you left/ Die wherever you wish but not among us” (“Those Who are Passing Between Passing Words”).

In light of this, a salient feature of Arab culture, the much vaunted virtue of hospitality might be considered as one way to “break the siege” (Somewhere else in the poem, Darwish writes: “the siege won’t end until we teach our enemies a few odes from our Pre-Islamic days”). Culture, with its diverse value systems, traditions and beliefs, Darwish maintains, can facilitate social cohesion. This leads to the second trope in the poet’s schema of revising the binary of victimizer and victimized, i.e, memory. The use of the collective “we” that

recognizes perpetrator and perpetrated on common grounds invites the reader to ponder their common “wounded past” of catastrophe. Neither victim nor perpetrator, the Palestinian and the Israelis are rather seen as participants in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator. The poet invokes the tumultuous history of two landless peoples, the Jewish state of diaspora and the Palestinian state of exilic displacement, with their ensuing sense of loss and violence; he is acting upon the commonality (and reciprocity) of their humanity. By drawing on collective memories – memories of suffering and victimhood – that are usually mutually exclusive and cancelling each other out, the “battle of memories” (Gil Hochberg 116) that in national discourses endeavors to recognize one side as the sole victim while totally negating the victimization of the other disappears with Darwish, in favor of a recognition of overlapping experiences of suffering and pain. The standards used to sort the innocent and the guilty become troubled. It remains to be said, however, that the outcome of this shared “wounded past” has yielded two different realities. While the exilicly displaced Palestinian keeps nurturing desperately an unfulfilled “homing desire” simply because neither is the old homeland available anymore nor does the new adopted one in any way resemble or bear any relationship to the old, all returning Israelis are being accommodated in the increasing constructions of settlements in their “promised land” at the expense of the Palestinians. “The wounded past” has been compensated for in the case of Israelis, but remains open, festering, unsealed and unhealed for the Palestinians.

To put it in a nutshell, the face-to-face encounter of victim and perpetrator – with its factual and symbolic undertones – is suddenly alert to its critical historic milieu. Indeed, the poem is not taking place in a moment of *nunc stans*, but rather rooted in the context of occupation. The historical memory of the Holocaust metaphorically referred to in the poem as the Jewish “wounded past” is juxtaposed to the poet’s actual state of siege (“the year two thousand and two” and its connotative meaning of military oppression and state of siege). The poem’s opening is evocative in this regard:

Here on the slopes of hills, facing the dusk and the cannon of time.
Close to the gardens of broken shadows,
We do what prisoners do,
And what the jobless do:
We cultivate hope.

The image of “prisoners” cultivating “hope” could function as an illicit analogy with the Jews in concentration camps, who nurture hope to cope and outlive the Nazi death machine. Although “Memory competition does exist,” expounds Michael Rothberg, and “sometimes overrides other possibilities for thinking about the relation between different histories” (10), Darwish seeks mutual understanding of

historical tragedies that could usher in acts of solidarity and empathy. As such, in Rothberg's words, "far from blocking other historical memories from view in a competitive struggle for recognition, the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories" (6). Darwish holds that to dismantle the "hierarchy of suffering" (9) embedded in the patronizing Western cultural history and bring to light the Palestinian predicament, blocked from view, it is important to engage in "dynamic transfers" of terrible forms of political violence. The history of Jews and anti-Semitism reverberates in Darwish's poetic narrative so as to bind it together with the Palestinian history of dispossession.

Even though Darwish alludes to the Holocaust, he calls his enemy (and his reader) to reflect beyond it into a universal evil called "ethnic cleansing" to which Palestinians under Israeli occupation are subject. It is clear how comparisons to the Holocaust as an instance of state sanctioned violence contest claims of singularity of victimhood and contribute to the denationalization of historical memories. According to Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider:

Holocaust is no longer about the Jews being exterminated by the Germans. Rather, it is about human beings and the brutal and most extreme violation of their human rights. The Holocaust is turned into a holocaust and becomes a decontextualized symbol. Genocide, ethnic cleansing and the Holocaust are becoming blurred into an apolitical and ahistorical event circumscribed by human rights as the positive force, and nationalism, as the negative one. ("Memories of Universal Victimhood", 6)

The Holocaust memory has served as a politico-cultural prism through which many victimhood narratives are voiced. The Holocaust remains a specific historical event but acquires a universal signification as it transcends the confines of the Jewish community and becomes a cultural symbol of "evil"; at the same time, the occupation stops being a unique colonial occurrence to reach its demonic expression in "ethnic cleansing" and genocide. This collective sense of victimhood has important effects on the way Darwish perceived both parties' discourses over the conflict as mutually inclusive, rather than exclusive.

A third tool Darwish uses to humanize his enemy and transcend the dyadic structure of victim and perpetrator is to engage in what Jeffrey Alexander calls "the process of trauma creation". According to Alexander:

By denying the others' suffering, people not only diffuse their own responsibility for the suffering but often project the responsibility for their own suffering on others. In other words, by refusing to participate in ... the process of trauma creation, social groups restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone. (*Cultural Trauma*, 1)

By recognizing the suffering of his enemy, Darwish cuts across the “distasteful competition over who suffered most.” Instead of succumbing to “victimhood nationalism,” as an amalgam of “competing national memories over the position of the victim” (Lim 46), he instigates trauma as a shared historical reality, turning, in this way, the individual victimizer into the collective victim. The first “killer,” for instance, is admonished to remember gas chambers; the pain endured will dissuade him from resorting to violence to make a point:

[To a killer:] If you reflected upon the face
of the victim you slew, you would have remembered your mother in the
room
full of gas. You would have freed yourself
of the bullet’s wisdom,
and changed your mind: ‘I will never find myself thus.’

The transposition of the Jewish mass murder from a historically situated war crime into a poetic trauma drama is meant to serve as moral lessons. One way to reconciliation, Darwish surmises, depends on the “killer” learning his historical lesson by performing his *mea culpas* and unburdening himself of his own evil deeds. Heeding this call, however, would jettison the soldier’s self-justifying authority, along with that of his people’s own victimization. Pappé explains: “Acknowledging the Other’s victimhood or, beyond that, recognizing yourself as the victimizer of the Other is perhaps the most terrifying ghost train one can decide to embark upon. Most Israeli Jews are unable or simply refuse to contemplate the possibility” (161). The humanity of the enemy that would draw from the collective trauma drama and repudiate “the bullet’s wisdom,” therefore, remains putative and unfulfilled as is clear from the use of “if” clauses.

The trauma in question is future-oriented and transgenerational. It brings into proximity not only the enemies themselves but also their children. The traumatizing effect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cuts across generations, with continued ramifications in the present life:

[To another killer:] If you left the foetus thirty days
in its mother’s womb, things would have been different.
The occupation would be over and this suckling infant
would forget the time of the siege
and grow up a healthy child
reading at school, with one of your daughters
the ancient history of Asia.
They might even fall in love
and give birth to a daughter [she would be Jewish by birth].
What, then, have you done now?
Your daughter is now a widow
and your granddaughter an orphan.
What have you done with your scattered family?
And how have you slain three doves in one story?

The image of the child bound to his/her father's fate, regardless of whether he/she is the victim's or perpetrator's child consolidates the universality of war trauma and its indelible effects on subsequent generations. An equivalence of suffering is established subverting respective hierarchies of victimhood and offending and positing the existence of fluid, liminal and ambivalent spaces of traumatic memories. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler evokes precisely how the human condition of interconnectedness and vulnerability represents the basis of reimagining – instead of rummaging – the possibility of community (20). “Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all,” she notes; “and if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire” (20). We are united by the virtue of the physical and moral vulnerability, she explains; this shared precarity in turn renders us ethically responsible for others. Thus, the traumatic experience “can contribute to a cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of a new form of community” (Craps 2) that recognizes and even legitimizes the Other's suffering. The sequence of rhetorical questions however casts doubt on the cathartic viability of traumatic suffering. Rather than expand human sympathy, what emerges from such trans-generational trauma work is a victim whose earlier hatreds are reproduced, rather than overcome.

Despite such lapses of doubt over a possible approximation of victim and enemy, Darwish tries to define a political stance which goes beyond the permeable and invisible boundaries of identity politics; he is interested in resuscitating a dialogue with history from below. He writes poetry to awaken a lost sense of empathy and to destabilize “hierarchies of suffering,” by bringing together two people's traumas with their mutually exclusive stories of loss. “Mahmoud Darwish is here breaking down the most complicated conflict of our times onto a comprehensive level of emotions, projecting a possible future for Israelis and Palestinians sealed by a hypothetical family in unity but affected by the ongoing conflict” (Daniel Roters 15).

Yehuda Amichai: “Jerusalem remained in the starting crouch: / all the victories are clenched inside her, / hidden inside her. All the defeats.”

This section will explore the type of solidarity Amichai demonstrates towards the Palestinians. He must have understood, to quote Judith Butler, that:

Historically we have now reached a position in which Jews cannot legitimately be understood always and only as presumptive victims. Sometimes we surely are, but sometimes we surely are not. No political ethics can start from the assumption that Jews monopolise the position of victim. 'Victim' is a quickly transposable term: it can shift from minute to

minute, from the Jew killed by suicide bombers on a bus to the Palestinian child killed by Israeli gunfire (*Precarious*, 103).

A crucial part of Amichai's quest as a poet and humanist is admitting that Palestinians are like Jews, that they possess an essential humanity and must be included within their moral boundaries, ceasing to be seen as hostile "others." He attempts to create linkages too often denied and seeks to state an "equal solidarity" with both conflicting sides. In this regard, he concurs with the thoughts of Butler, who says that "what will be just for the Jews will also be just for Palestinians, and for all the other people living there, since justice, when just, fails to discriminate, and we savor that failure" (Butler, 2013). Insisting on equality and justice, in the name of the absolute singularity of human life, is at the core of Amichai's poetry. His position on the Palestinian struggle appears to be one of liberal multicultural tolerance, which affirms the right of Palestinians and Israelis to exist—both as ahistorical entities. This co-implication of self and other is poetically revealed, without claiming transcendental objectivity or truth. Needless to say that his verse remains extremely depoliticized and he has never made a clear pronouncement on the Palestinians' right over land or self-determination or return. Amichai's poetic acrobatics allow him to evade all forms of politicization and historicizing, and thereby to evade the possibility of becoming a vessel of political criticism. "I want to die in my bed," he famously proclaims in a poem of that title, announcing his political disengagement from all moral obligation that feeds on hegemonic Israeli nationalism and resulting in ethnic cleansing and violence exercised by the Israeli state on Palestinians.

This being said, the proximity that Amichai seeks to create in his poetry is in part achieved through the deconstruction of the binary logic of victimizer and victimized. He does so by advocating a universal right of citizenship through a peaceful co-existence of the two rivals and claiming equal rights to the land. In doing so, he unwittingly aligns himself with Edward Said in affirming that the history of Palestinians today "is so inextricably bound up with that of the Jews that the whole idea of separation, which is what the peace process is all about – to have a separate Palestinian thing and a separate Jewish thing – is doomed. It can't possibly work" (Said 2004, 424). In a poem entitled "Jerusalem," the symbolically contested space of the city becomes a site for mutual co-habitation.

On a roof in the Old City
Laundry hanging in the late afternoon sunlight:
The white sheet of a woman who is my enemy,
The towel of a man who is my enemy,
To wipe off the sweat of his brow.

In the sky of the Old City
A kite.
At the other end of the string,
A child

I can't see
Because of the wall.

We have put up many flags,
They have put up many flags.
To make us think that they're happy.
To make them think that we're happy.

The poem—apparently simple and straightforward—is not without political overtones. “The enemy” (the Palestinian) is evoked, and the weariness over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is insinuated. Jerusalem itself (“the Old City”) is a space charged with political, religious, and military connotations. Amichai seems interested rather in the human side of the city, in the closeness of people's lives and their mingling in daily life. The study of this poem brings to the fore two main ideas. First, the political connotation of “Jerusalem” paradoxically emerges from an apolitical discourse that claims to tell the “mundane story” of Jerusalemites. Second, the humanity of the city risks annihilation by the brutal reality of flags. The use of cloth imagery (laundry and flags) is judicious in transmitting ordinariness and extraordinariness. Indeed, Amichai uses hanging laundry as a symbol for the humanness of the enemy, while the flags imply that this humanness is actually threatened by political and military divisions.

In the first stanza, the persona, an eyewitness of sorts, observes a domestic scene of drying laundry – a sheet and a towel – the properties of “my enemy.” The flapping whiteness of the sheet symbolizes purity and peace, and the “towel” is clearly associated with “toiling” and labor. The condensed rhythmic and rhyming structure of this first stanza reflects the tedious adult life in the Old City. The structure of the second stanza is light and airy in tune with the image of a child flying a kite. The witness is unable however to enjoy the scene, obstructed by the Wall. This can be conceptualized as a political gesture, for the Wall is a constant reminder of “the existential distances that simply cannot be traversed by the two foes” (quoted in Al-Kahlan 123). The child seems to transcend “the enemy” signifier, oscillating between Self and Other. In this highly idealized child world of freedom and innocence, symbolized by the kite transgressing the confines of the Wall, the city disentangles its sacredness and political factions and becomes a *tabula rasa*, a neutral space, devoid of animosity. The dialectics of enmity rebound in the final stanza (“we”/ “they”), with the metaphor of “flags” adding political adversity. As symbols of contested national allegiances, and reminders of the ongoing conflict, flags tarnish the idealistic image of the precedent stanza. Both sides have erected and flown “many flags,” asserting the right to place, and showing “the enemy” that each side is happy. Obviously, neither side is happy but both are caught up in an illusory transitory moment of euphoria. The flags are mnemonic traces of the tensions that prevent normal life in the city; they are the visible reminders of boundaries;

just like the Wall, they prevent to see beyond, and to recognize the humanity of the city. Only children seem to escape this paradigm. Amichai implies a return to a pristine innocence that would enable the people of Jerusalem to reach mutual respect and understanding and thus happiness.

Amichai's poetic egalitarianism that aspires for peaceful co-existence of the Arab and Israeli seems hard to convert into a touchable and everyday reality. The flags, in the poem, reminders of fragile peaceful co-existence, camouflage the hidden violence that is ready to erupt in the first crisis. The metaphor of the flags as well as that of the wall serve as markers of exclusion and othering that destabilize the acute proximity of the inexorable Israeli and Palestinian bodies. In her latest book *Parting Ways*, Butler discusses the implicated realities of Palestinian and Israeli lives, advocating that "the other is not over there 'là-bas' beyond me, but constitutes me fundamentally. The other does not just constitute me – it interrupts me, establishes this interruption at the heart of the ipseity that I am" (Butler 2013a, 60). When the poem's speaker is accidentally exposed to the domestic privacy of his "enemy" (the "laundry," "sheets," and "towels" metaphors attest to his vulnerable humanity), he is forced to confront his alterity, which interrupts his being and undoes his seemingly secure, self-sufficient subjectivity. "Jerusalem," therefore, teases out the possibility of an ethical alterity that transcends the exclusionary political reality, holding to the idea that "[i]n Jerusalem, everything is a symbol" ("Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Why Jerusalem"). The poem, composed by a "postcynical humanist" as Amichai likes to call himself, engenders a radical reconsideration of the city as a shared space. "Maybe now," he says, "after so much horror, so many shattered ideals, we can start anew—now that we are all armored for disappointment" (239). This idea is hinted at in "Wildpeace," where Amichai's vision of peace is not the technical, military "peace of a cease-fire," but a living thing:

Let it come
like wildflowers
suddenly, because the field
must have it: wildpeace.

It remains to be said however, that tumbling between the world that should be - a state of "happiness" through political autonomy-, and the world that simply is - the recognition that "Jerusalem is built on the vaulted foundations/ of a held back scream" ("Jerusalem, 1967"), the two inimical "dwellers" of Jerusalem are forced to share the anxiety of making a life in the tight, liminal space of the city, the hyphen of survival and resistance.

In "An Arab Shepherd Searches for a Lamb on Mount Zion," Yehuda Amichai "aestheticizes" religious texts for the same humanist

reasons. By secularizing these texts, he subverts the binary of victimizer and victimized and expresses his hope for an era of peace and love between the Palestinians and the Israelis on the land of Palestine:

An Arab shepherd searches for a lamb on Mount Zion,
And on the hill across I search for my little son,
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father
In their temporary failure.
Our voices meet above
the Sultan's pool in the middle of the valley.
We both want the son and the lamb
to never enter the process
of the terrible machine of '*Chad Gadya*'.
Later we found them in the bushes,
and our voices returned to us crying and laughing inside.
The search for a lamb and for a son
was always the beginning of a new religion
in these hills (Cited in Coffin 1982: 341).

The poem juxtaposes the stories of two distressed men looking for their lost charges. The Arab shepherd and the Jewish father are exposed as fallible, confused and even tragic human beings as they search a lost lamb and a lost child. Both are "in temporary failure," unable to protect and raise an innocent charge who has slipped away from them. The poem is steeped in cultural and religious references, cloaking Jerusalem in Islamic and Judaic significance. The two men's voices meet in places that acknowledge the religious and cultural diversity of the city, as "Mont Zion" and "Sultan's Pool" are part of the collective cultural repertoire of both Muslims and Jews. The collective voice "we" wishes that the lost dears would not "get caught in the wheels / of the terrible *Chad Gadya* machine," thereby alluding to "Only One Kid," a popular song sung in Aramaic and Hebrew at the end of the Passover seder. The melody, cumulative in its pattern, is used to entertain children, and resembles in its structure and effect the popular American children's song "I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly." The shared anxiety of getting involved in the "Had Gadya machine" alludes to a shared trauma of victimization, the fear of being caught in events the two fathers have no control over. Thus, when the lamb and the child are found in the bushes, each adult jubilates, "laughing and crying," though the joy is now "back inside". The final allusion to "a son" and "a lamb" acknowledges the closeness of Judaism and Islam.

Both religions share Abrahamic faith and the myth of the son's sacrifice. Whether a covenant with God, or a token of submission, the sacrificial act (of Isaac in Judaism or Ishmael in Islam) speaks to the shared religious legacies of Arabs and Jews and demonstrates a deep resonance between their respective scriptures. The son in both religions is saved, in the same spot – Mount Moriah – on whose rock (the rock of sacrifice) the Temple is erected and it is where the Dome

of the Rock stands today. Through his imagery, Amichai invokes the two fathers as the children of Abraham, creating a deep cultural and psychological bond between the two that cuts across their current animosity. The religious narrative is evidently aestheticized, and thus, made to legitimize the equal rights to “Jerusalem.” A deconstructive approach to reading the poem would focus on its intrinsic structure – parallelism in this case – which highlights the absence of hierarchical ordering in relation to sacred texts, stories, and protagonists. Refusing a single focal point from which understanding can be organized and ordered is at the heart of all deconstructive endeavors. Hence, although the two poems differ, primarily due to their different subject matter, they can be read as documents that effectively decenter the Israeli-Jewish conceptualization of the Arab enemy.

Eventually, Amichai’s poetry releases the Jews from the straightjacket of eternal victimhood and persecution complex; it undermines the relentless emphasis on the uniqueness of Israeli suffering, to the exclusion of all other contextual facts. By recognizing the Palestinians’ rights to the land and to a narrative of loss, Caroline Rooney writes: “The Palestinians have come to stand not merely for the secondary and inferiorized term in an oppositional battle between two identities but for precisely a wider universality of humanity” (49). This is another merit of Amichai’s deconstructive poetic exercise.

Conclusion

Literature is an important vehicle to contest the binary logic of self and other that stipulates that in order for the self to exist, the other has to be annihilated. As Edwin Thumboo reminds us, there is a certain (often unacknowledged or suppressed) aspect of interdependence between Self and Other: “we are both Self and Other, depending on who constructs and manages the equation, who does the inspecting, and who is the inspected” (15). The poetry discussed in this article attempts to free the signifiers “Arab” and “Jew” from the script of social and cultural hostility and semiotic ambivalence. It liberates them from their static positions of victimizer and victimized and relocates them in a cultural space articulated between and across binaries. The Israeli-Jew and the Palestinian Arab, Darwish and Amichai seem to suggest, are necessarily locked in a circuit of identification in which “each *is* the other” (Said 1). Instead of further being entangled in “distasteful competition over who suffered most” (Polonsky and Michlic 9), the poets adopt an anti-essentialist and antinationalist cultural-political stance; they dismiss the narrow logic of victimization that casts the other as antagonist and enemy, and seek to concede the grievances and aspirations of both peoples. Eventually, Darwish’s and Amichai’s poetry, I suggest, echoes off each other; it makes a plea for acknowledging the fact that trauma, like history, is never “only or fully

one's one" (Caruth 20-24), and that accordingly, it cuts across and binds together powerful social, political, and psychic sites.

Notes

1. Some relevant socio-political and socio-psychological studies include: see Elias, 1986; Enns, 2012; Holstein, 1990, pp. 103-122; Jacoby, 2015, pp. 511-530. On the particular Israel-Palestinian context, see Noor, M., Shnabel, N., Halabi, S., & Nadler, A., 2012, pp. 351-374; Nyhan, B., & Zeitzoff, T., 2017, pp. 1-21; Shnabel, N., Halabi, S., & Noor, M., 2013, pp. 867-877; Bar-Tal, D., 1998, pp. 22-50.

2. The Israeli and the Palestinian Arab are here gendered male (The Editor).

3. For more details on Arab literature about Zionism, see Y. Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes to Israel* (Jerusalem, 1972). See also Shimon Ballas, "The (Ugly) Israeli in Arab Literature," in *New Outlook* (Tel Aviv), November, 1974, pp. 78-86.

4. See Daniel Bar-Tal's *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict Representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish Society*. Cambridge UP, 2005.

5. Many Arab authors have discerned the clichés of – and prejudices toward – Arabs in modern Hebrew literature. For instance, see Ghassan Kanafani's article about racial superiority as reflected in Israeli novels: "al-ghatrassa al-'unsuriya 111-riwaya al-sahytiniya", in *Al Adab* (Beirut), 14 June 1967, pp. 3-5. See also three articles published in *Hebrew Studies*, no. 18, 1977, that study the representation of the Arab in Hebrew literature: Isaac Barzilay, "The Arab in Modern Hebrew Literature: Image and Problem (The Ottoman Period, 1880-1918)", pp. 23-48; Jacob Kabakoff, "The Arab Image in Hebrew Fiction between World War I and World War II", pp. 49-59; and Robert Alter, "Images of the Arab in Israeli Fiction", pp. 60-69.

6. See Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," pp. 253–64.

7. Maya Jaggi. "Poet of the Arab world: Mahmoud Darwish." *The Guardian* (7 June 2002). <https://theguardian.com/books>. Accessed 20 June 2020.

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