

Hydrofictions: Water, Power and Politics in Israeli and Palestinian Literature

Hannah Boast

240 pages, 2020, £80 (hardback)

Edinburgh University Press

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With the publication of *Hydrofictions*, Hannah Boast spearheads critical innovation in a region often overlooked in postcolonial studies. Noting that “Israel/Palestine has become the site at which twenty-first-century anxieties and hopes about our water supply coalesce” (2), Boast takes her cue from the emerging field of petrofiction and asks: what does the critic cultivate by reading the resource of water in literature? Henceforth, she formulates a new shared (blue) space for ecocriticism and postcolonialism, creates a lexicon for future “hydro-critics,” and performs erudite literary analyses of both Israeli and Palestinian texts – the kind of ‘relational’ work Anna Bernard recently endorsed (12) – while simultaneously bringing into orbit diverse thinkers such as Erik Swyngedouw, Kathryn Yusoff, and Giorgio Agamben. For a monographic debut just shy of 200 pages, this is an impressive achievement.

Hydrofictions begins with a proficient introduction. Boast explains, among other things, the status of Israel/Palestine’s water resources, describes the troubling consequences of Israel’s huge desalination project, and performs preliminary readings of works by Layla ’Allush, Ghassan Kanafani, and Nathalie Handal, preparing us for the turn away from familiar and “sometime hackneyed” land-based tropes of exile and displacement towards the “hydrosocial” power relations that will prove for her so generative (11).

Chapter one looks at three texts that interact with the River Jordan: a 1910 short story, “Hawaja Nazar,” by Moshe Smilansky; the poem ‘A River Dies of Thirst’ (2008), by Mahmoud Darwish; and Mourid Barghouti’s memoir *I Saw Ramallah* (1997). By reading Smilansky’s story alongside the better-known work of the two contemporary Palestinian writers, Boast assesses the role the river plays both aesthetically and symbolically in forming their respective national identities. Accounting for Smilansky’s binationalist politics, together with his work in the citriculture industry, she re-examines his story and reveals the significance of the river in providing “material and metaphorical” nourishment for the Zionist project (33). Included is a revelatory critique of the protagonist, Lazar – a Jewish immigrant who has a fatal obsession with swimming across the River Jordan – in which she draws comparisons with “muscular Judaism” and the story’s descriptions of river and body, finally suggesting the tale’s ambivalence towards the nationalist project, thus casting doubt on the means of the river’s appropriation into the Israeli myth.

On the other hand, when reading the Palestinian texts, Boast explores how the river functions for the Palestinian imaginary by locating a lost Palestine in a way that differs from more familiar

“terrestrocentric” symbolism, “with the crucial distinction being water’s capacity to stand in for the movement or stoppage of national time” (34). There is a neat example of this when investigating Darwish’s description of the river as “descending.” The Arabic for ‘descend’ (نازل), Boast explains, shares its root with ‘guest’ (نزِيل), echoing Darwish’s description of how the river visits each of the villages on its route, recalling “a time before Israel’s militarised borders as well [...] as the temporariness of its designation as a border” (51). In such moments, Boast collaborates in poetically mapping fluvial Palestine, while also participating in the “active remembrance” that writers such as Darwish petitioned for.

In chapter two, Boast shifts her focus towards the swamps, or wetlands, and Meir Shalev’s reappraisal of Israel’s drainage programmes in his 1988 novel, *The Blue Mountain*. Boast ushers this novel into the spotlight for the way it brings together the post-Zionist critique of Israel’s national narratives with the parallel emergence of Israel’s environmental movement. *The Blue Mountain* finds Shalev in challenging form, creating a protagonist, Baruch, who has built a cemetery where his family’s orchard once stood, subverting the efforts of early settlers. In order to fully understand the symbolic resonance of such an act, Boast takes us through the complex history of swamp drainage in Israel/Palestine. Beginning with the Ottomans, she traces the radical alterations of the country’s hydrological map and considers how, when these projects met with the Zionist narratives of plenitude and health, the draining of the malarial swamps took on a zeal that wreaked havoc on the region’s natural ecosystems, which led to the eventual reflooding of the swamps and reversion of the so-called pioneering work of agricultural Zionism. By bringing this astute historical research to bear on such a text, Boast enlivens literary method – ‘hydrocriticism’ in action – to formulate an understanding of Shalev’s fictional milieu that conveys the burgeoning eco-awareness which enables the post-Zionist critique necessary for progressive Israeli thinkers.

The sea and its role in shaping Israeli identity in Amos Oz’s *The Same Sea* (1999) is the focus of chapter three. The novel was published at the height of the ‘Mediterraneanism’ ideology that ostensibly offered some hope of inclusivity during the Oslo era. Digging into Oz’s problematic depictions of Arab characters and the Mediterranean community, while contextualizing the action of the novel within its contemporaneous setting, Boast extends her criticism to the Israeli left in general, using the novel as a catalyst for a wider assessment of the ‘progressive’ left and its selective amnesia. Mediterraneanism, for Boast, “rather than representing a new integration into the region [...], operates to exclude another ‘imaginative geography,’ the Orient, in the form of both Israel’s Arab and Muslim neighbours,” and consequently reaffirms Israel’s exclusionary nationalism, proffering affiliation with European sympathies; a “self-exculpating strategy,” she calls it in a (not uncommon) moment of unsparing critical marksmanship (110, 138).

The final chapter, entitled “Water Wars,” looks at Sayed Kashua’s novel *Let It Be Morning* (2004) in relation to the strategies of infrastructural warfare used by Israel against Palestinians during the last two decades. The novel explores the limited and conditional experience of Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Boast explicates how water – and access to it – behaves as a material and symbolic currency within that experience. The novel follows the denizens of a Palestinian Israeli village that has had its water supply halted, implicitly evoking the state of affairs typically experienced by Gazans. Boast unpacks the implications of such an allusion, citing the history of public sanitation and its contiguity to the idea of citizenship – Michel Foucault’s ideas around biopower are put to good use here. There is an excellent moment wherein Boast reads the lack of water and the narrator’s inability to wash himself as a latent critique of traditional masculinity before broadening her reading to make “connections between dirt, cleanliness and the notion of the human, particularly with regard to the notion of race” (169). The chapter also provides an excellent compendium of the infrastructural damage sustained by the Palestinian territories through raids by the Israeli military. Here, we find Boast fearlessly bearing witness.

In questioning the narratives of scarcity and abundance that have characterized Israel/Palestine’s relationship with water, *Hydrofictions* departs from the dominant, and often constricting, framework of conflict over land, developing a metaphorical and formal register that foregrounds “connectivity and flow over fixity and rootedness” (5). This leads to novel and unexpected ways of confronting what can be a daunting corpus. Hoping to bring Israeli/Palestinian fiction to new audiences, Boast, in this exceptional book, thus reinvigorates the critical appreciation of the region’s creative writing through a unique ‘hydro-lens’ and demonstrates the capacity of literature to help us understand the narratives presented to us around water and their social and political entanglements.

Works Cited

Bernard, Anna. *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine*. Liverpool UP, 2013.