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The Dark Side of Cultural Sensitivity: Right-Wing Anxiety and Institutional Literary Censorship in Israel

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In their discussion of the interpretation of the literary work of fiction, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen explain that: "Literary appreciation is the appreciation of how a work interprets and develops the general themes which the reader identifies through the application of thematic concepts. […] The thematic concepts are, by themselves, vacuous. They cannot be separated from the way they are 'anatomized' in literature and other cultural discourses" (Lamarque and Olsen: 399). The subtle unravelling of the work's thematic concepts relies on the context of its reception, with its idiosyncratic sensitivities and cultural sensibilities of that time and place. However, cultural sensitivity also has a dark side as it may occasionally ignite a sort of allergic reaction to a work, identifying it as a threat that must be eliminated. My paper examines the case of literary censorship in Israel. Three partially banned works of fiction reflect three aspects of the Israeli right-wing anxiety concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The futility of sacrificing Israeli soldiers' lives, the acknowledgement of the Palestinian perspective, and, finally, the possibility of deflecting the animosity between the two nations to a point of allowing for mutual love.

Keywords: Literature; censorship; literary education; Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In their discussion of the interpretation of the literary work of fiction, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen explain that:

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> vacuous. They cannot be separated from the way they are 'anatomized' in literature and other cultural discourses. (Lamarque and Olsen 1996: 399)[1]

Indeed, the subtle unravelling of a work's thematic concepts heavily relies on the context of its reception, with its idiosyncratic sensitivities and cultural sensibilities of that time and place. However, this notion of a thoughtful and nuanced reception by an understanding and culturally imbued audience also carries a darker aspect. Occasionally, cultural sensitivity can trigger an adverse reaction to a work, labeling it as a social or national threat that needs to be eradicated. While exemplary works of art often evoke feelings of unease and discomfort, there seems to be a tipping point at which this agitation becomes unbearable for individuals or groups within society. Consequently, when the work provokes a significant group, who are institutionally represented by influential policymakers, it may be subjected to censorship, either full or partial. In such instances, Lamarque and Olsen's framework for interpreting the work within the context of its reception can be inverted: a society's nature can be better comprehended by examining the works it seeks to eliminate and denounce.

In the following, I would like to peruse the case of institutional literary censorship in Israel. While conducting a comprehensive survey is beyond the scope of a single paper, exploring three notable instances can shed light on the national narrative and the resulting political deadlock. The partial banning of three works of fiction in Israel, one by the Central Region Major General and two by the Israeli Ministry of Education, reflects the right-wing[2] anxiety in Israel regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The futility of sacrificing Israeli soldiers' lives, the acknowledgement of the Palestinian perspective, and the potential for fostering mutual love and overcoming animosity between the two nations. Although these themes can be considered "topical themes" as described by Lamarque and Olsen (1994: 426), analyzing them as

[1] See also Lamarque (2015).

[2] According to Galnoor and Blander (2013), "right" and "left" in Israeli politics denote the general stance towards matters of foreign policy and national security. In brief, left-wing parties express optimism about peaceful solutions with Israel's Arab neighboring countries, and particularly those Palestinian refugees in the territories occupied after Israel was attacked by Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, in the 1967 war, and lean towards collaborations between Jews and Arabs within Israel. Right wing parties consistently express pessimism about the possibility for peaceful solutions, especially towards the Palestinian refugees, and lean towards emphasizing the need to use force against Israel's enemies. Since the appearance of settlements in the occupied territories, this became another important focal point in the politics of left and right, whereby left-wing parties consistently declared an objection to settlements (or at least the willingness to evacuate them towards a peaceful solution), whereas right-wing parties emphasize the biblical Jewish right over these lands (or at least their strategic importance for the safety of Israel's existence) (Galnoor and Blander 2013). In a more recent analysis of the political map, while Skorek (2021) shows a deviation towards right by previously considered left parties, he, in fact, shows that "right" still reflects a more militant perspective towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

societal themes through the act of censorship holds broader methodological potential. In all three cases, I focus on how these works are valued based on their instructional purpose. In other words, I would like to analyze the fingerprints of right-wing culture in Israel, not via the concepts of the literature it endorses, but through the main themes of the literature it rejects, establishing, to paraphrase Matravers (2014), a *dis*-engagement with literature.

Before delving into these three cases, I would like to clarify certain aspects regarding censorship in general and the case of Israel. Firstly, I define censorship as the restriction or limitation of the distribution or access to information (in a wide sense, including visual information and various forms of expression) in defense of an individual or a group of people. I categorize censorship into two types: military censorship, which withholds information from external audiences, typically the enemy, and moral censorship, which restricts information within internal groups. The following discussion addresses only moral censorship. Secondly, it is important to note that while the case of Israel possesses its unique circumstances and characteristics, the call for moral censorship is not an exclusive occurrence.[3] In some regard, the call for censorship reflects the existence of pluralism and coexistence among diverse communities with varying values. Authors are free to create works that may conflict with certain values within these communities. In a stable totalitarian regime, where only one perspective prevails, there would be no need to censor new works since authors would not have the freedom to write and distribute them in the first place.[4] For instance, consider the headline from *The Telegraph*: "Religious parents want *Harry Potter* banned from the classroom because it 'glorifies witchcraft'" (Espinoza: 2015).[5] This demand demonstrates the existence of an audience

[3] According to Fellion and Inglis, "censorship is inevitable because people impose limits on each other's actions" (2017: 11). They also note that typically, the decision to censor does neither lie with a single individual nor with a single direct act but works subtly involving various people and groups.

[4] A good example of this is the use of coded metaphors in Polish poetry during the late 50s. Due to the ban on certain topics, poets resorted to "self-censorship" (Kloc 2016: 122) by employing allegory or metaphor instead of direct speech. This form of "veiled speech" (Baltussen 2015: 1) has been a longstanding practice "of self-regulation" in the ancient world and throughout history (Baltussen 2015: 7). Similar attempts to conceal thought in modern totalitarian regimes have been explored by Cardone (2010), Karimi-Hakkak (2019) and Oliveira (2019). Becnel and Moeller (2021) demonstrate how even American school librarians may self-censor book recommendations due to job insecurity or social concerns.

[5] According to Erlanson et al., the contemporary political landscape leads to censorship of literature while "its freedom remains a topical issue […]. The literary medium can thus be said to occupy a dual position: on the one hand deemed necessary to control, and on the other utilized as an instrument of control" (2020: 10). Gaffney argues that conservative parents often direct their activism towards censoring Young Adult Literature, thereby supposedly "defending community values, protecting children, or making public institutions more 'family friendly'" (2017: 100). The *Harry Potter* series, a popular subject for conservative complaints,

that shares the same geopolitical and educational background as the intended readers of the book series, despite their religious differences. What may be harmless fantasy fiction to one community, is perceived as promoting Satan worshipping by another. However, when the call for censorship not only emerges from within a specific community but is also carried out by state officials, the infringement on artistic freedom becomes more significant. Therefore, in this discussion, I address not the mere dissatisfaction with works of language arts, but three instances of moral censorship spearheaded by representatives of the state. All three instances are instances of partial censorship. In other words, none of the works were entirely eradicated from the state, but in all these cases the initiators of the censorship used their power to ban the works entirely within the limited area of their jurisdiction. All cases caused significant media and public reactions and remained ingrained in social memory years later.

This discussion requires some local context. My interest in censorship in Israel stems from teaching introductory classes in aesthetics. In these classes, I introduce Plato's *Republic* early on. Plato's logical progression from the desire for luxuries to the necessity of censorship is of relevance. According to Plato, for the state to expand and provide luxuries, it must engage in warfare and conquer neighboring territories. This requires a standing army. To build such an army, the state must educate its children, shaping them into future soldiers. Crucially, this process primarily involves literary education. Consequently, the state assumes the responsibility of overseeing the stories used in children's education.

Having taught the same text at Rutgers University in the US, I find teaching it in Israel much easier, and not solely because I am more comfortable teaching in Hebrew. The logical chain presented by Plato resonates deeply with Israeli students. In fact, it is so ingrained in their understanding that I exercise caution, avoiding any overtly political interpretations that may incite antagonism. To ensure clarity, my presentation slides include direct citations from the text, demonstrating that I am not fabricating or employing figurative language in conveying this logical chain: greed leading to occupation, which in turn requires an army, and an army necessitates a careful indoctrination since childhood. I pose the question to students: why does Plato emphasize education as vital for future soldiers? What sets this profession apart? While American college students would stare back at me with blank expressions, failing to perceive the distinctiveness of being a professional soldier compared to a farmer or a builder, Israeli students, many of whom have fulfilled their military obligations, readily

"was targeted in the Frankfort, Illinois, school district because it 'contains lying and smart aleck retorts to adults' and attacked in Bucktown, Pennsylvania, in 2001 for 'telling children over and over again that lying, cheating, and stealing are not only acceptable, but that they're cool and cute'" (2017: 107). See also Ivey and Johnston (2018), Lindsköld (2020), and Dávila (2022).

respond that soldiers may sacrifice their lives in battle. Such willingness contradicts human nature and thus necessitates indoctrination from a young age.

"Soldiering" holds a significant presence within Israeli culture. One illustrative example is an advertisement for Lis, a maternity ward at a central hospital in Tel Aviv. This advertisement was part of a series that depicted fetuses as future achievers in various professions. The ad portrays a fetus, seemingly suspended in its mother's womb, donning a military cap and saluting. The text in the upper right corner reads: "Receiving the President's Award for the year 2038 (Probably be born in Lis)." Even before his birth, the male fetus is already associated with its military destiny. Although the ad was swiftly removed due to protest, it exemplifies a distinct Israeli perspective on male embryos. Another notable example is a comic strip by Daniella London–Dekel (2015). The notion that fetuses are destined to become soldiers extends beyond a mere advertising blunder for her. In the emotionally charged strip, she recounts her reaction upon discovering, during a routine pregnancy ultrasound scan, that she is carrying a male fetus. The following panel depicts her in the solitude of her car, moments after this revelation, overcome by tears because a boy signifies a future soldier who may be drafted to a combat unit. The potential for loss and the specter of death already hovers in her thoughts, even before giving birth to her son. The weight of soldiers' lives being at risk in war—the very reason Plato's *Republic* emphasizes the necessity of education to instill the willingness to sacrifice—profoundly impacts Israeli culture. Unlike in American society, Memorial Day in Israel is not synonymous with shopping. It is a day when radio stations play mournful songs about fallen soldiers, and television programs feature interviews with their grieving families. The extent of the collective grief is immense, as countless families are affected.

The tragic cost of war and the impact on fallen soldiers looms prominently in the first case I wish to discuss. This incident occurred in rather unconventional circumstances for a cultural event. It took place during the War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel in 1969 when the Israeli Defense Forces' Infantry Ensemble performed in front of a large audience of soldiers about to enter the battlefield. The Infantry Ensemble is a part of the extensive military educational system in Israel. As most 18-year-olds are drafted, serving in the army becomes the Israeli equivalent of a college experience: the first adventure of life away from the family home, where individuals encounter people from diverse backgrounds, and, crucially in this context, complete their educational journey. The IDF's Education and Youth Corps oversees a range of programs and activities, including the Infantry Ensemble, a musical band composed of soldiers whose purpose is to uplift morale.

The occasion I am referring to involved a performance by the ensemble featuring a new song written by Yaakov Rotblit. Rotblit, having lost his leg (Pikerk 2006) and several of his brothers-in-arms in the previous war against Egypt, the Six-Day War in 1967, was unable to partake in the jubilation that swept Israeli society following the splendid victory. He saw the sacrifices made as futile. Those who lost their lives in the war had lost everything, gaining nothing from the triumph of one army over another. His song protested the celebration of military victories by giving voice to the insights of the ultimate victims of war: the deceased soldiers. The premise of the song is that nothing can bring the fallen soldiers back. Therefore, they implore the living to reject war and strive for peace. The lyrics and melody draw inspiration from American anti-war musical *Hair*.

A Song for Peace

Let the sun rise
light up the morning
The purest of prayers
will not bring us back

He whose candle was snuffed out
and was buried in the dust
bitter crying won't wake him up
and won't bring him back

Nobody will bring us back
from a dead and darkened pit
here neither the victory cheer
nor songs of praise will help

So just sing a song for peace
don't whisper a prayer
Just sing a song for peace
in a loud shout

Allow the sun to penetrate
through the flowers
don't look back
let go of those departed

Lift your eyes with hope
not through the rifles' sights
sing a song for love
and not for wars

Don't say the day will come
bring on that day –
because it is not a dream –
and in all the city squares
cheer only for peace!

The song eventually became the anthem for the left-wing peace movement and tragically became associated with the assassination of Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin in 1995. Rabin sang it during a peace rally, which culminated in his assassination. Symbolically, a bloodstained printout of the song was later discovered in his shirt pocket. However, when the song premiered in 1969, Central Region Major General, Rehavam Zeevi, was infuriated by the performance and banned the Infantry Ensemble from performing in the Central Region. Zeevi's anger stemmed from the anti-war theme of the song, particularly its implication that the victory of war holds no meaning for the fallen soldiers. This leads to the logical conclusion that death in war represents the ultimate sacrifice, which is ultimately futile. Furthermore, the depiction of the world of the dead as a "darkened pit" certainly does not contribute to the morale of soldiers. Compare with this passage from Plato's *Republic*:

> […] if he believes in the reality of the underworld and its terrors, do you think that any man will be fearless of death and in battle will prefer death to defeat and slavery? By no means. Then it seems we must exercise supervision also, in the matter of such tales as these, over those who undertake to supply them and request them not to dispraise in this undiscriminating fashion the life in Hades but rather praise it. (386b)

Zeevi's banishment of the Infantry Ensemble seems to align with Plato's logic, as it aims to avoid presenting death as a terrible thing in the education of soldiers. To boost morale, dead soldiers should be praised, just as Plato holds in this passage from *Republic*:

> And shall we also do away with the wailings and lamentations of men of repute? […] we shall be right in thus getting rid of them […]. What we affirm is that a good man will not think that for a good man […] death is a terrible thing. (377d)

This Platonic notion that lamentations should praise death in battle is evident in the memorial statue of the roaring lion in Kfar Giladi, which commemorates the eight warriors who died in the Tel Hai battle of March 1st, 1920. The plaque reads: "It is good to die for our country," a sentence attributed to the last words of Joseph Trumpeldor, one of the honored warriors. This sentence has become a focal point in the History syllabus for elementary schools in Israel. The memorial plaque represents a broader phenomenon of glorifying soldiers' death deeply ingrained in the school system. The Israeli school system, according to Tami Hoffman (2016), subtly promotes militarization, including trips to death camps in Poland that connect the Holocaust to army service. Officers in the IDF also make symbolic visits to the death camps, ghettos, and synagogues in Poland during their military service. According to Ben-Amos and Hoffman, these trips perpetuate the belief ingrained in the educational system that the holocaust could happen again if it were not for the IDF and the willingness of young men to serve in the army (Ben-Amos and Hoffman: 2011). "A Song for Peace" challenges the necessity of war, threatening this carefully established consensus.

While the case of "A Song for Peace" highlights the neglect to view war from the standpoint of the young men who are sacrificed on its altar, the next case exemplifies the disregard to consider the standpoint of those labeled as "the enemy." Dehumanization, whether intentional or unintentional, is a technique employed to portray others as dangerous. Studies on the dehumanization within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict show that it is a mutual characteristic characterizing the perspectives of both sides (Bruneau and Kteily 2017).[6] However, here I focus on an aspect of dehumanization of the Palestinians from the Israeli perspective:[7] the denial of allowing the Palestinian voice to be heard within the school system.

This case was seasoned with reservation from the get-go: the inclusion and later the exclusion of poems by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish from the Israeli school curriculum. Darwish's history with Hebrew-speaking Israeli reception has always been politically charged. The translator of the extensive Hebrew collection of Darwish's poems, Reuven Snir, confesses that for decades the task of translating Darwish from Arabic to Hebrew was considered too subversive to handle, since "Darwish was synonymous with the Palestinian people's fight for freedom and self-definition. His poetry is viewed as representing the national Palestinian moral conscience" (Snir 2015: 13). However, now Darwish is possibly the poet most translated to Hebrew perhaps because "at an early stage in his poetic way, Darwish rejected the usage of stereotypes of the Jewish or Israeli enemy that were prevalent in the Arabic society, in favor of a humane view of the person behind the mask" (Snir 2015: 20). Darwish declared that as a poet, he must consider his art before his political agenda. The Palestinian people's fight may benefit from Palestinian poetry only if it is first and foremost good poetry (Snir 2015). Moreover, Darwish saw himself as an Arab poet more than a Palestinian poet (Snir 2015). His early poetry includes recurring motifs linked both to fight for land, and to his life in exile (Snir 2015).[8] Yet later Darwish's references to the Palestinian fight become more and more allegorical, faint, and indirect. While some of his poems do express opposition to the state of Israel, including "Those Who Pass Between Fleeting Words," which repeatedly calls for the Israeli people

[6] For further exploration see also Harel et al. (2020).

[7] Gani and Jamal (2019) and Abdelrazek (2021) explain how dehumanization has become ingrained in the Israeli perspective towards Palestinians. Abdelrazek (2021) discusses an example of its consequences, recounting how Israeli soldiers mocked young children during a night-time search of their residence: the children were lined up, photographed, and instructed to say "cheese!" While there may be worse scenarios in soldier-child interactions, this seemingly harmless incident (although undoubtedly traumatic) illustrates the emotional success of the dehumanization perspective. The young soldiers, lacking empathy, failed to recognize the children's plight and found the situation amusing. See also Kemp (2015).

[8] However, as Saif and Al-Sowaidi (2023) argue, Darwish's style is typified by the numerous allusions to the Quran.

to "be gone" (Darwish 1988), they reflect more of a wishful thinking rather than explicit directives.

In March 2000, the Israeli Knesset discussed the suggestion to include poems by Darwish in the Literature school curriculum. This proposal was raised by Education Minister Yossi Sarid. Likud member Uzi Landau linked this decision to Sarid's commemoration of the Kafr Qasim massacre, where Israeli border police executed over forty Palestinians who had broken curfew in the village in 1956 (No author 2000). By juxtaposing the commemoration of the massacre and the inclusion of Darwish, Landau marks Darwish as a symbol of Israeli guilt for atrocities and war crimes. However, Landau viewed the acknowledgement of guilt as a sign of weakness rather than a means of atonement, considering it a dangerous act of self-deprecation.

When considering the political situation in Israel, it is crucial to acknowledge the constant risk of violent turmoil. Sarid's suggestion to include Darwish's poems coincided with a hopeful period of Israeli-Palestinian history, characterized by a peace-seeking Israeli government engaging in negotiations with the PLO. However, a few months later, the second Intifada erupted—a multifaceted Palestinian attack or retaliation against Israeli occupation. This led to a loss of hope and the subsequent rise of a right-wing government. Minister of Education Limor Livnat aimed to reverse the previous changes, prominently symbolized by the exclusion of Darwish from the curriculum.

Livnat's decision had little to do with the benign content of the poems and everything to do with their general symbolic value. Darwish was—and still is—a Palestinian "cultural icon" not only for his poetry but also for his involvement in drafting a declaration of independence for the Palestinian people, as requested by the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (Butt 2018: 55). [9] His poetry together with his political involvement have led to his "remarkable achievement" in carving "out a national identity for the Palestinian nation" (Butt 2018: 70). Nonetheless, most of his poetry reflects an individual's perspective and acquires political significance within its cultural context. Darwish's poems often employ a first-person narrative, personalizing their message (Butt 2018). Thus, the poems that Sarid wished to include were only subtly and remotely political. One of these poems is Darwish's renowned "My Mother," written during his imprisonment in Israel for violating a curfew (Meron 2015). The poem expresses a longing for a sense of childhood comfort and security, and even if read symbolically, as expressing a yearning for a homeland, it poses no real challenge to Israel's right to exist when read in the context of an Israeli Jewish school.

[9] According to Saif and Al-Sowaidi, Darwish "is one of the most important Palestinian, Arab, and international poets whose name remains associated with the poetry of liberation, resistance and the Palestinian *waṭan*, or homeland" (2023: 409, emphasis in original).

My Mother

I long for my mother's bread
My mother's coffee
Her touch
Childhood memories grow up in me
Day after day
I must be worth my life
At the hour of my death
Worth the tears of my mother.

And if I come back one day
Take me as a veil to your eyelashes
Cover my bones with the grass
Blessed by your footsteps
Bind us together
With a lock of your hair
With a thread that trails from the back of your dress
I might become immortal
Become a God
If I touch the depths of your heart.

If I come back
Use me as wood to feed your fire
As the clothesline on the roof of your house
Without your blessing
I am too weak to stand.

I am old
Give me back the star maps of childhood
So that I
Along with the swallows
Can chart the path
Back to your waiting nest.

Adding to the understanding that the problem with including Darwish in the curriculum was more symbolic than content-related is the fact that two of his poems were already part of the Arabic as a foreign language curriculum, predating Sarid's announcement (Yona 2007). Sarid had intended to include more of Darwish's poems in the Literature curriculum, but his announcement caused public attention, leading to upheaval and subsequent backlash.

From the right-wing perspective, the concern with Darwish's poems is not about defaming Israel or inciting terrorism but rather about challenging the dehumanization of the enemy, specifically recognizing Palestinians as human beings. Knesset member Michael Kleiner openly expresses this viewpoint on including Darwish's poems in the curriculum:

> I want to tell you, […] Mahmood Darwish is just the harbinger. […] The real plan of the minister of education is to set a net of mixed Jewish and Arab schools, an education net where children will get acquainted closely, learn to stop hating, learn to love, learn to fall in love, maybe to get married, maybe to have children, and in the heat of their love—to put an end to the Jewish-Arab conflict […] the national danger in such a mixed education system […] threatens the Jewish identity of each and every child and of the entire state. (Yona 2007: 77, my translation)

Kleiner's astounding speech highlights the deep-seated apprehension provoked by the inclusion of Darwish's poems. The desire to censor his poems stems not from concern over their subtle poetic messages, but from the indirect legitimization that comes with their very inclusion. The resistance to including the poems reflects a rejection of an inclusive approach to the Jewish-Arab conflict. Darwish is seen as threat not as part of a Palestinian resistance from without, but as a potential trigger to transformation of mindset within the Israeli-Jewish community: a shift towards overcoming generations-long animosity and fostering amicability, even potentially a romantic love that would dissolve the divisions between the two groups. This last notion leads the discussion to my third and final case.

Dorit Rabinyan's novel *All the Rivers* explores the theme of romantic love between the first-person narrator, Liat, a Jewish-Israeli female writer, and Hilmi, a Palestinian male artist. It is set in New York City in 2002 amidst the lingering trauma of 9/11. The novel begins with a false alarm when FBI agents invade Liat's apartment, mistaking her dark olive skin and black hair, combined with her Hebrew writing, as potential signs of terrorism. This incident was triggered by a misinterpretation at a café where she was reported and followed. Ironically, the novel itself faced a more disturbing suspicion. Although Rabinyan dwells on her protagonist's Middle Eastern appearance as a cause of her mistaken identity, she could not have anticipated that her novel would suffer a similar fate. The novel was accused of promoting treason and endorsing terrorism, leading to its removal from the literature school curriculum.

The love story between Liat and Hilmi, realistically depicted, is doomed. Despite their ability to temporarily escape the burden of their national identities in cosmopolitan New York City, they know this love story cannot last. Although I accept Lamarque and Olsen's stance regarding literary truth,[10] this literary depiction finds support in contemporary research.[11] In a pivotal moment in the fourth chapter, as Liat develops feelings for Hilmi, she recalls an Israeli radio commercial, warning Jewish women about the seduction and kidnapping by Islamic

[10] For a challenge of Lamarque and Olsen's stance on the relation between literary truth and literary value, see Pitari (2022).

[11] For an analysis of the problems experienced by couples of interfaith marriage in which a Jewish-Israeli woman is married to a Palestinian man, see Sabbah-Karkaby (2022).

men. Although the organization behind the commercial in the novel is fictitious, it anticipates "Lehava" (Hebrew acronym for "the Prevention of interfaith in the Holy Land"), an organization founded in 2009 by Jewish supremacist activists.[12] Liat may antagonize Jewish supremacy, but she does decide to end the relationship with Hilmi upon their return to Israel. In an interview, Rabinyan describes Liat as a "soldier of Israeli education. She is the most obedient, practical and has self-control. And because of who she is, because of her fear […] this is more of a long process of resistance to love, than it is a love story" (Sela 2014, my translation). As evidence of her past, Liat still possesses a release form from her time in the army, which she explains to the FBI agents who invade her apartment at the novel's beginning:

> 'That's from the IDF—the army,' I explained. 'It says I'm allowed to leave Israel as I wish.' Before he could unleash another barrage of questions, I added, 'Military service is compulsory in Israel. Women serve two years and men three. I served in a unit that takes care of soldiers' social welfare. I enlisted in 1990 and finished in '92'. (Rabinyan 2015: 15)

Carrying her expired military service form in her passport pocket marks her military service as part of her core identity. While the form grants her permission to leave Israel, she cannot escape the lasting impact of her military experience. Thus, her romance with Hilmi, a representative of Israel's enemy, becomes a constant struggle between her cosmopolitan intellectual self in New York and her internalized identity as an Israeli soldier. Liat's encounters with Hilmi trigger memories of growing up in Israel after the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, exposing the animosity between Israelis and Palestinians. When she overhears Hilmi speaking Arabic on the phone, she experiences a mixture of familiarity, having been exposed to Arabic throughout her life in Israel, as well as a sense of estrangement and distance. This estrangement is portrayed as both enticing and daunting. However, as a realist, Liat acknowledges that their relationship has no future. In contrast to *A Trumpet in the Valley*, another novel depicting a tragic love affair between a Jewish woman and an Arab man, where fate separates the couple through the man's untimely death, in *All the Rivers*, Liat and Hilmi's decision to separate precedes his eventual drowning. Their relationship is destined to fail in the reality of Israeli society.

However, even though the novel practically illustrates the failure of romance in transcending the political conflict, it was removed from the

[12] For an analysis of the stance towards interfaith marriage between Israeli-Jewish and Palestinians, see also research by Litvak-Hirsch, Yahya and Boag (2016), with its telling title "'Sadly, Not All Love Affairs Are Meant To Be...' Attitudes Towards Interfaith Relationships in a Conflict Zone." Hakak addresses the perception by far-right movements such as "Lehava" and right-wing politicians, that the coupling of a Jewish-Israeli woman with a Palestinian man is particularly "undesirable" (2016: 977), allegedly due to the coercion of the helpless woman by her forceful male spouse. See also Gaya (2022).

Literature curriculum[13] by the Ministry of Education due to the belief that "intimate relationships between Jews and non-Jews threaten the separate identity" (Kashti 2015)[14] of each group. The decision to censor the novel was not based on its literary or truth value in portraying the challenges of such a relationship, but rather on the portrayal of a forbidden theme. Moreover, the ministry of education's declaration expressed the concern that "adolescents lack the wide perspective that includes regard for the preservation of the people and the meaning of interfaith marriages" (Kashti 2015). The novel was thus banned despite the protest of the Professional Committee for Literature Education, including the committee chair. Following the decision, two committee members resigned (Kashti 2016). The decision was also met with the protest of school principals and literature teachers, some of whom reacted to the decision by reading aloud excerpts of the novel in their classes (*Walla* Editorial 2016). Nonetheless, the Minister of Education at the time, Naftali Bennet, who supported the decision, stated that "the educational system should not promote values that contrast the values of the state" (*Walla* Editorial 2016, my translation). From a philosophical viewpoint, this is an interesting declaration. It highlights not only the obvious link between political agendas and the education system, but also the perceived power of the humanities, prompting decisive actions to prevent the unwanted dissemination of ideas through education. Compare this with the words of Socrates at the end of book 2 of *Republic*:

> When anyone says that sort of thing about the gods, we shall be wroth with him, we will refuse him a chorus, neither will we allow teachers to use him for the education of the young if our guardians are to be god-fearing men and god-like in so far as that is possible for humanity. (Plato 383c)

As this passage exemplifies, education, particularly literary education, has historically served as a platform for promoting certain themes deemed socially valuable while suppressing others. As Hartsfield and Kimmel argue,

[13] Importantly, the novel was never an obligatory read, but appeared in a list of contemporary Israeli novels, for teachers to choose from. Teachers were never coerced to teach the novel if they found it inappropriate.

[14] Following the exclusion of *All the Rivers*, a similar fate befell *A Trumpet in the Wadi* (1987) by Sami Michael, another novel portraying a tragic Palestinian-Jewish love affair (Skop 2016a, 2016b). While not officially banned from the literature curriculum, a committee aimed at including Eastern (Sephardi) Jewish culture in the curriculum made another novel by Sami Michael mandatory for final exams. Since teachers would not likely teach two novels by the same author, this implied that *A Trumpet in the Wadi* would not be taught, resulting in censorship by default. As Dávila explains, "even if teachers could curate class sets of titles" (2022: 379) technical restriction may practically limit their choice. Interestingly, it serves to illustrate that Rabinyan's novel was not a discrimination against a woman author (a phenomenon explored by Russ in *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983)), but rather censorship targeting novels depicting interfaith romance between Jews and Arabs. Despite the tragic nature of both novels (both ending with the death of the male protagonist, eliminating any possibility of a life together), the Israeli curriculum rejects even the notion of temporary love between such couples.

> educators must make decisions about what to include (or not) in the curriculum or the library. On one side of this decision-making process is selection. When educators engage in selection, they exercise their professional judgment, choosing books and materials based on principles such as literary excellence, curricular relevance, appropriateness, interest, and appeal to adolescent readers. Yet, on the other side of this decision-making process is preemptive censorship. Selection becomes preemptive censorship when a book aligns with selection principles but is rejected because of fear of controversy. Preemptive censorship occurs when educators purposefully keep a book's content and ideas away from students. (Hartsfield and Kimmel 2020: 443)

The case of *All the Rivers* demonstrates that preemptive censorship is not contingent on the way a theme is presented. The novel depicts the possibility of a shared future for an interfaith couple in a manner that aligns with a right-wing perspective of the conflict, portraying it as a distant and unrealistic fantasy achievable only in a sterilized remote environment. Nevertheless, it still sparked strong resistance. The mere mention of the theme, even its innocuous exploration, was seen as a threat to the core values of the Israeli nation, rendering the theme itself taboo.

In *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, Lamarque and Olsen argue that "the ideas constituting the large themes of our culture, the mortal questions, are in part literary ideas" (1996: 455). What I hope to have shown here is that "the ideas constituting the large themes" of the Israeli right culture are in part the mirror images of the literary themes that it rejects. Quite ironically, this also portrays a society that ascribes literature an incredible power, thereby exemplifying the words of Lamarque and Olsen, that "Literature is embedded in the value-scheme of our culture" (1996: 445). The situation of literary censorship in Israel since the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank reveals the reluctance of right-wing parts of Israeli society to consider the Palestinians as potential allies. Moreover, while all three cases are examples for a partial censorship, that limits the distribution of literary works, rather than entirely restrict its existence, in all three cases the extent of the censorship is the widest possible relating to the jurisdiction of the particular state's official who endorsed it. Given the current far-right government, the call for censorship may soon be nostalgically missed, as the threat to Israeli democracy may transform into a grim reality of dictatorship. In such a scenario, voices advocating for peaceful solutions are likely to be silenced, and the writing of papers like this one may become precarious. Reworking on this paper after the breaking of the war on October 7th, 2023, with the atrocities performed by Hamas in the south of Israel, and following the IDF's retaliation, my heart bleeds. The bodies of soldiers are piling up again, not to mention the unfathomable casualties in the Gaza strip, and the flickering hope for peace is difficult to sustain. However, beyond its depiction of a specific state of affairs, this paper offers a model for analyzing thematic concepts in reverse: from literary works to society. By tracing the evolution of moral censorship over time, one can uncover a society's story, or rather, one of its stories. Thus, the skill of literary interpretation becomes the skill of reading a society through the narratives it excludes.

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