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Abu banat: The Mizrahi Father of Daughter/s

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Abstract This article focuses on the character of the father in Mizrahi literature who has only daughters, including fiction from Yitzhak Shami (1888-1949) to Shani Boianjiu (b. 1987). The relationship between the father and his daughter/s challenges the conventional image of the patriarchal Mizrahi father and reveals its failure, albeit in different – and gendered – ways. In the male-authored works discussed, the daughter is a cipher. Those written by women not only question the traditional paternal trope but even propose alternative masculinities, alternatives that are only possible when the father cedes some of his authority.

Keywords Mizrahi. Masculinity. Father. Fatherhood. Daughter.

Summary 1 Fathers, Fatherhood, and Masculinity. – 2 Father Studies. – 3 A Literature of Fathers and Sons. – 4 Writing the Riddle. – 5 Absence. – 6 Righting the Riddle. – 7 A Man Who Isn't Here. – 8 Poetic Interlude. – 9 Rethinking Fatherhood. – 10 In Place of Speech.

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> What is a father? The one taken for the father. The one recognized as the true one. "Truth," the essence of fatherhood, its force as law. The "chosen" father. (Hélène Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, 1975/1991)

1 Fathers, Fatherhood, and Masculinity

Nothing, I will contend, reifies – nor challenges – an individual's masculinity (and its systemic counterpart of the patriarchy) as does the relationship a father has with his daughter/s. I propose exploring the expression and performance of Mizrahi masculinity through this relationship, beginning with the fiction writing of Yitzhak Shami (1888-1949), Shimon Ballas (1930-2019), and Sami Michael (1926-2024) as a baseline, and then focusing on that of Orly Castel-Bloom (b. 1960), Ronit Matalon (1959-2017), and Shani Boianjiu (b. 1987) with a short detour for a poem by Vicki Shiran (1947-2004).[1]

These writers whose output spans almost one hundred years represent four different generations. Shami, born in Hebron, is considered one of the first native Hebrew writers in Palestine. While his writing in Arabic has been lost, his Hebrew works show Arab and Middle Eastern influence (Hever 2006; Tamari 2008). Ballas and Michael both came from Iraq where they were each active in the Communist Party. Having begun their writing careers in Arabic they transitioned to Hebrew after living in Israel. The Hebrew reading public's introduction to Ballas – his 1964 novel *HaMa'abarah* (The transit camp) – opened with an Arabic phrase transliterated into Hebrew (Berg 1996, 60). His subsequent works further challenged the Israeli mainstream identity. Michael's fictional account of his mother's childhood in the Jewish Quarter of Baghdad, *Viktoriyah* (1993) cemented his reputation as a writer and the inclusion of the Mizrahi voice (London 1993). Castel-Bloom, born to Egyptian Jewish parents in Israel, pioneered the spare writing (*k'tivah razah*) movement and is known for her dystopic narratives that straddle the hyper-realistic and surrealistic. Matalon's family was also from Egypt; she was the first in her family to be born in Israel. In her writing she stretched genres, bringing together classic works of literature with journalistic techniques, humour with social critique, the visual with the literary, the aesthetic and the repellent. The youngest of the writers, Boianjiu, entered the Israeli literary scene

I thank the other conference participants and especially the anonymous readers for their feedback.

1 Threaded throughout the paper are lines from a poem by Amira Hess (1943-2023), *We will be talking here about a man who is not*. She was born in Baghdad and came to Israel in 1951. Her first of more than a dozen collections of poetry was published in 1984.

from the side; her novel *The People of Forever Are Not Afraid* (2012) was originally written in English, and began as an assignment for one of her classes at Harvard. The story is harsh, the narrative raw, the tone tough, but, as with Castel-Bloom and Matalon's writing, it is not without humour. By age the Egyptian born criminologist-activist-poet Shiran belongs midway between Ballas-Michael and Castel Bloom-Matalon, but she came to writing late; most of her published poetry was published posthumously.

This article offers a way to begin thinking about the connection between masculinity and virility, and the connections between each and fatherhood. There is an odd connection between virility and passivity; what does it actually take to father a child? Here the verb fathering specifically means siring, not parenting; it is a mere contribution during an act – generally of short duration – in which the (hetero) man presumably finds pleasure.[2] The very idea that to sire a child is an expression of a man's virility and thus his masculinity is, to be sure, problematic. Added to this is the idea that a real man (read: unambiguously masculine) will father boys, as if he bequeaths his masculinity to his progeny.

The title of this paper, *abu banat*, is an Arabic phrase that translates as 'father of daughters', or in today's parlance, a girl dad. The latter, however, lacks the implicit insult understood by speakers of Arabic – including our Mizrahi writers and their characters – as if the man doesn't measure up, as if he doesn't have enough masculinity to spare for his offspring. So too, there is the perceived risk that living in a household dominated with women is emasculating or dilutes the manliness.

2 Father Studies

Potentially relevant research looks at the ways fatherhood and masculinity intersect (Marsiglio, Pleck 2005) while making distinctions between parental status and parenting, between paternal male gender status (biological sex) and masculinity orientation (and variations within, Pleck 2010). The area of father studies scholarship grows out of gender studies and is still in relatively early stages. Much of the research cited here is from the west.[3] Most of the

2 Here I am thinking of celebrities who are well known as prolific fathers such as Elon Musk and Nick Cannon (both claiming twelve children each), or super-donors such as Jonathan Meijer.

3 "[F]athers who have been studied largely fall into two categories: namely, white, American, middle-class men in monogamous marriages who are the biological fathers of children with whom they live, and, in contrast, men who have sired biological children but failed to enact the role of fatherhood for the most part" (Inhorn et. al 2015, 23).

scholarship coming out of the Middle East in Gender Studies in general is supported by NGO's (non-governmental organizations); it is focused the status of women and oriented toward policy (Elsadda 2023). This brief survey, however, is meant as a general context for understanding the literature and not as either a prescriptive or normative reading. The essential father hypothesis that dominated the early subfield – the idea that fathers make an essential, unique, and uniquely masculine contribution to the development of their child or children (Blankenhorn 1995; Popenoe 1996) – has given way to a more nuanced (and less politically fraught) understanding of the importance of positive involvement. An exploration of the shifting ideas of masculinity in the wake of so-called new fatherhood is prevalent in the west and especially among researchers in the US and the UK (Lewis, Lamb 2007; Finn, Henwood 2009). The literature suggests that men from underrepresented and marginalized communities characterized as representing 'hybrid masculinities' challenge and reconfigure the hegemony (Randles 2018). [4]

The typical image of the traditional father cuts across cultures.[5] He is described as authoritarian and distant, at least emotionally if not physically. His status as a paternal figure is determined by paternity and position; his role is defined by his success in providing for the family (*parnasa*) and protecting them. He is the head of household and is expected to be the one to solve problems. The state of the field of father studies – the applied side of which is largely rooted in social work – counters the stereotypes and is oriented toward finding ways in which fathers can be supported in their roles and encouraged toward better parenting.

3 A Literature of Fathers and Sons

Literature both reflects the traditional conception of the father and helps shape new approaches to the enterprise of fatherhood. Modern Hebrew literature is of particular interest here as it has long been characterized as a literature of fathers and sons. The biblical story of the *akedah*, of the binding of Isaac, has served as a central paradigm for writing and reading the literature, offering nearly unlimited opportunities for reinterpretation, transvaluation and revision (Nash 1984; Coffin 1985; Feldman 2010). The idea of the father prepared

4 While the article specifically refers to "poor men of color" in the US, similarities in hierarchies, power relationships, and centre-margin dynamics invite application to other minorities including Mizrahi men in Israel.

5 The traditional father is often contrasted with the egalitarian father. See for example: Glauber, Gozjolko 2011; Dette-Hagenmeyer et al. 2014; Suwada 2015; Paterna, Martínez 2006; and for brief historical overview see Maskalan 2016.

to sacrifice his son resonates in a society dominated by wars and shaped by mandatory military conscription. This characterization of the literature persists despite the many changes in Israeli society and in the literary scene. The father-son relationship is explored by variations on the akedah story in Mizrahi (Berg 1997), immigrant, and even post-Zionist literature, in which the son or the father dies in the beginning or the end of the narrative. Consider, for example, the son dying at the beginning of A.B. Yehoshua's novella *At the Beginning of the Summer* (1975) or the end of his novel *Mr. Mani* (1990) the father dying near the beginning of *Equal and More Equal* by Sami Michael (1974), at the end of Haim Hazaz' s *Mori Said* (1943), and both the father and son's deaths framing Yaakov Shabtai's groundbreaking *Past Continuous* (1977; Ezer 2000). The akedah motif is, of course, also prevalent in poetry (Jacobson 1987; Karton-Blum 2013). Israeli literature privileges the narrative of the father and son, the trope of the akedah looms large. The father – daughter trajectory is often omitted from the writing and almost always from the reading. Yet even before the flourishing of women's literature in the 1980s, daughters have somehow found their way into the story.

In western literature the father-daughter plot presents the daughter as a commodity, her challenges to the father's authority end with her marriage, death, or exclusion as a social outcast (Sheldon 1977; Boose, Flowers 1989). Often such works are modelled on the ancient stories of Electra or the daughters of Jephthah; either way the daughter is sacrificed. "The daughter, as opposed to the son, accepts a conflict solving ending which is in the interest of the father, consistent with his code of values […] daughter sacrifices part of her identity" (Sheldon 1977, 13).

At first glance, the same pattern or paradigm holds true for the Mizrahi writers as well, but upon a closer look, we see how the marginalized do indeed challenge the hegemonic patriarchy. The comparison to Ashkenazi writing is likely to remain implicit in this article, while the differences between generations and genders will be explicit. Rather than confirming or countering the conventional image of the patriarchal Mizrahi father, the women's narratives – and this article – confuse and confound the convention.

The stories authored by men focus on the difficulties of the father knowing his daughter. The women writers more often present the dyad from the perspective of the daughter, adding texture, complexity, and nuance. Here I argue that it is the Mizrahi father- or more precisely the father constructed by the Mizrahi daughter – who offers a rethinking of the father and his masculinity.

4 Writing the Riddle

> The father and the daughter are a riddle inside a riddle.
> (Sami Michael, *Water Kissing Water,* 2001)

In Yitzhak Shami's novella "Father and Daughters" the titular father-character is away from home for seven years, travelling in order to procure a dowry for his daughters. Instead of describing the father's journey, the narrator focuses on his return. Rather than ending in wedding joy, this narrative ends in shame, defeat and ignominious death. In the father's absence the daughters have descended into 'bad culture': entertaining strangers, dressing provocatively, and living in decadent opulence. The actual homecoming stands in stark contrast to the one the father imagined in happy anticipation: the daughters' cries of joy and expressions of contentment, their attention to him, and their delight at the splendid gifts he brings. Instead, his daughters react to his return with fear and revulsion, rejecting his gifts with scorn. The reader quickly understands how little the father has known his daughters. "The old feelings of distaste and loathing awoke [in the daughters] and extinguished the spark of pity and forgiveness which had kindled in the ashes of forgetfulness and distance" (Shami 1951, 63). The daughters have not changed in his absence, but rather have been liberated from his stifling rule, free to express their wanton materialism and licentiousness.

The law of the father has been totally abandoned; the story concludes when the father casts himself into the river. He cannot face life outside the (patriarchal) myth – while the daughters cannot face life within it. An interesting clash of myth and real, and in both there is destruction.

5 Absence

There are father-daughter stories in which the initial success of the marriage plot belatedly gives way to failure. In Sami Michael's *Water Kissing Water* (2001) the protective father Yaakov cedes his position (albeit less than willingly) to a protective husband Yosef. Shortly after, the daughter disappears, almost as if their protection suffocates her to the point of effacement and erasure.

After her disappearance, the father and husband become close, as if signatories to an unwritten pact. Their names – Yaakov and Yosef – as well as their personal status – bereaved father and orphaned widower – speak to the father-son nature of the relationship that develops between them. The daughter's absence suggests the impossibility of the father-daughter relationship, and a father's impotence to protect his daughter. A novel that starts out with strong

potential for exploring father-daughter relationship reverts to the father-son paradigm.

The father in *Not in Her Place* (or, Not in Place of Her) (1994) by Shimon Ballas is literally absent from the entire narrative. It is the daughter Nomi's obsession with the mystery of her late father that is at the centre of this novel. The daughter finds out that she knew little of his work life, his research and his private life.

She remembers her father only as an absence – at his government job by day and shut up in his study by night. After his death, she discovers that he was researching and translating Ferdowsi's *Shah-nameh*, a Persian epic that famously tells the story of fathers and sons (Ferdowsi 2007).

In the absence of her father, she has surrounded herself with father figures: the authoritative Gershon, the officious and aggressive Prof. Sharoni, her patronizing spouse Phillipe.[6] She is passive. Even while bridling under their forceful pronouncements she gives in. She cedes her father's papers to the professor, her cultural education and children to Phillipe, her power of attorney and bodily autonomy to Gershon. In the end she does what others want her to do, it merely seems to her that she is deciding. The father, as well as the father substitutes, dominate and she has little effect on them.

6 Righting the Riddle

> Suddenly you see things are not only in black and white
> And when you see colours they don't fade.
> (Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

The works discussed above were penned by male writers and tend to view the father-daughter relationship from the father's perspective (even when the daughter is seemingly at the centre). Over time, the father's function appears to shift away from providing for the daughter, providing a home and later a husband, yet it remains unclear what it is shifting to. Women-authored stories and poems not surprisingly redirect the focus to the daughter and her perspective; in so doing the patriarchal structure is further interrogated if not eroded. While the fathers' stories question his role, the daughter's question her place in the literature and the society.

In Orly Castel Bloom's *Dolly City* (1992) the accepted social values and patriarchal institutions are not so much questioned as imploded. The text is governed by feminist appropriations of the *Akedah*, the

6 "The absence of a biological father will only result in the proliferation of symbolic fathers" (Caeser 2000, 179).

binding of Isaac (Feldman 2010, 230), in which the woman replaces not the sacrifice – that is, Isaac or the ram – but Abraham. The akedah motif repeats; Dolly as the mother nearly kills her son with concern, and she confesses to having killed her father (Castel-Bloom 1992, 122). While read ultimately as an ode to motherhood[7] the text does battle with the sacred cows of the father – founding fathers, father texts, and the institution of the father.

The character Dolly's own relationship with her father fuels both her life and the narrative, albeit in perverse ways. An offhand comment by her father leads her to study medicine for eight years in Nepal; and she is crushed to realize he may not have meant her to do so. "The thought that my father hadn't actually intended me to study medicine in Katmandu was devastating to me", she remarks, "since this was the first and last thing he told me to do that I did" (Castel-Bloom 1992, 63-4). Her father's cancer causes her to see the illness everywhere, and her medical training induces her to try to cure it. Her methods are as questionable as her sanity. The father, in this work too, is represented by absence. He has died before the story begins. So too, the foundling Dolly adopts has no father. She makes a modest attempt to find out who the father is but limits her search to the other pilots at 'B. Off' (literally Be fly), her father's employer.

The narrative is critical of Zionist leaders and leading texts as well as the master narrative. A.D. Gordon, brought back to life as an organic farmer addicted to chlorophyll, plans to leave for Mexico City. "Dolly City is no place to start a farm… It's an ugly stinking, filthy, disgusting, boring, depressing city – What else is there to say?" (Castel-Bloom 1992, 67). The utopia described in Herzl's *Altneuland* is turned on its head (Ginor 1995).

This founding father offers a reassessment of the significance of the father. "The father is less important", says Gordon, "A child can know not his father, but a child who doesn't know his mother, that's serious" (Castel-Bloom 1992, 62). The text casts aside the father, the patriarchy, and the patriarchal order. It abandons the law of the father to embrace chaos.

7 Note that the book is dedicated to the author's daughter.

7 A Man Who Isn't Here

We will talk about a man who isn't here.
(Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

Ronit Matalon's father, Felix Matalon, shows up in her writing, in both her fiction and non-fiction. Homo politicus from the beginning, when he arrived in Israel from Egypt he established the *Sohba*, a political organization to deal with the problems faced by the Mizrahi population and edited its mouthpiece *HaMeorer*. Matalon's stories take a tolerant and even loving stance toward a father who was absent a great deal more than he was present, showing up in the character of the father: living elsewhere in her first novel *The One Facing Us* (1995); dead in the novella *And the Bride Closed the Door* (2016); or estranged in her masterpiece *The Sound of Our Steps* (2008). In this last example, the relationship between Maurice and *el-bint* (Arabic for 'the girl'), the author's alter ego, is perhaps best represented by the photograph of her with her parents in Venice's Piazza San Marco. Elsewhere I have written about this novel being a portrait of the mother (Berg 2018), but a portrait of the father also is found in its pages. He is represented by chapters titled "Paper", political writings based on those of the writer's own father, brief appearances, and a short word-portrait by the mother Lucette.

The photograph is worth dwelling on both because of its multiple (seven) appearances, and for the narrator's insistence that it doesn't exist: "A fictitious photograph… It never happened (Matalon 2008, 26); "There's no such thing. There's no such photograph. I won't make the photograph speak. I won't force it to be there because it isn't there. There's no such thing" (Matalon 2008, 139).

The existence of the photograph is undermined by narrative assertions to that effect that it does not actually exist; in other iterations where the photograph is described, the father's role is usurped by the mother, or, in another, the child crying throughout the trip refutes the ideal family portrait. So too the image described, of the mother, father, and child, is false: the photograph presents as if the three are a complete unit. It echoes a painting that plays a prominent role in the book,[8] but in fact omits from the family unit the older brother and sister who were left behind in Israel.

The father challenges the stereotype of both men in general and Mizrahi men in particular. Back in Egypt Lucette, who becomes the mother in the story, flees her abusive (first) husband at seven months pregnant. Maurice steps in and marries her, taking on a child who is not biologically his, without ego or prejudice. His full

8 Edouard Manet, *Le Balcon*, 1868-69.

acceptance of "another man's child" disrupts the aforementioned connection between virility and masculinity and the privileging of genetic fatherhood (what we might term sire-ship).

In Israel he attains a senior position at the Labour Ministry where he jeopardizes his job and the family income for his principles. He neither provides for nor protects his family on any regular basis. But he does contribute. Because his relationship with the mother, is passionate and volatile, they can neither live together nor stay away from each other. Thus Maurice sporadically appears in the family's life but never with any consistency. When he does appear, however, he brings the entire outside world into their insular corner.[9]

> Maurice was *Elaalam*; intentionally or unintentionally he brought *elaalam* with him when he came.
>
> He brought a Hebrew newspaper when he came (the child looked for the hidden child in the picture: "Where's the child?"). He brought a French newspaper, which was also *elaalam: Le Monde*.
>
> He brought the newspapers he wrote in Hebrew and French, *HaMeorer The Wake-Up Call* ("But what's it supposed to mean? Who's sleeping?" asked Sammy). (Matalon 2008, 373)

8 Poetic Interlude

> About a man who is hollow even while living.
> (Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

Vicki Shiran's poem "The Bible Brings Tears" (Shiran 2005, 16-21) similarly paints a portrait of a father who, presumably, bears some resemblance to poet's own father. The poem opens with the image of a man crying in the bathroom. The lyrical or poetic I – that is, the voice of the poem – is that of the daughter. She is of indeterminate age, old enough to have childhood memories but still young enough to remember them as a child would, old enough to judge her father as wanting but young enough to do so without wisdom or grace.

In response to his daughter's question of why he spends so much time in the bathroom, he answers that he doesn't want his wife – her mother – to think less of him, to "think I am not a man" (Shiran 2005, 16). Both are aware that tears are not considered masculine; that his weeping violates the masculine standard. He retreats to the bathroom to complain to God, to shed his tears, and to find refuge from the expectations of the father's role.

9 In addition to his "Paper" chapters he also stars in multiple chapters titled *elaalam* ('the world' in Arabic).

There are three competing images of a father in the poem. The ideal (according to the daughter) is the father who is secure in his role, as head and provider of the family. "I wanted him to be a father with money in his pockets", states the poetic voice, "For books, for what the teacher said" (Shiran 2005, 17). The father remembered (in the child's memory), is the one who would take the family to the boardwalk on the weekend, treating his children to cotton candy, corn on the cob, and ice cream. The actual father, the one the child discovers as she gets older, is the one who cries, haunted by his shortcomings. Where the visits to the boardwalk were idyllic to the child, and her love for her father unequivocal:

> When I would lean on the railing on the boardwalk, my back to [the sea
> My father would encircle me in happiness, say to me
> Madame, you have on your shoulders a giant the colour blue
> His eyes sparkling with laughter
> And many beads of light
> (Shiran 2005, 17-18)

the father remembers the visits with anguish:

> Your mother hated it so much… / We'd ride like sardines [standing up…
> You should know, if a man gives a woman just a promenade on [the Sabbath
> And she, By God, cooks and cleans and washes all week,
> The woman looks at him like a rag, and with reason…
> (Shiran 2005, 18-19)

The girl's happy memories are the source of the father's shame: "So, if I have one bad memory in life | it is Sabbath afternoons on the boardwalk". The father's shame, however, is not just based in the strict gender roles – the wife takes care of the house, the father supports the household – but also his great love and appreciation for his wife. He gives her credit for her work throughout the week and regrets not fulfilling her needs and wants. "I was a man, your mother was the prettiest girl in Cairo | Life turned upside down on us like a bowl of mud" (Shiran 2005, 20).

The magic of the daughter's memories is checked by the father's reality. The girl, now older than she was in those outings, counters her father's confession with scorn, describing him as "broken like a broomstick". She recognizes that her scorn has crossed a line but cannot help herself, her once prince of a father now a pathetic figure crying in the bathroom, a "broken pendulum" (Shiran 2005, 21).

In a departure from the male-authored works, the poem does not leave the father as a broken figure weeping on the toilet, continuing the legacy of the fathers mentioned above: in Shami's novella the one who drowns himself; Abu Sha'ul (literally, Shaul's father) in Sami Michael's first novel *Equal and More Equal*, who loses his sight, his competence, and his status upon his arrival in Israel. While the father in Shiran's poem no longer commands the respect of his children as he would have had they stayed "back home" (in Egypt), he is not a wholly pathetic character. The daughter, buffeted by mixed feelings, swinging from love to derision, from loyalty to rebellion, coldly berates him. The father fights back:

> Your story, *habibti*, is not my story
> Mine is mine and yours is yours, I have cried over you
> And you over me, *kif kif*, we are even
> The slate is clean. In a strange whisper he added
> God's truth your story brings tears
> But mine too, admit it. (Shiran 2005, 21)

Perhaps broken, but unbowed.

9 Rethinking Fatherhood

> No one knows where this woman's father has gone
> One day he turned and left the scene.
> (Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

In Shani Boianjiu's debut novel *The People of Forever Are Not Afraid* (Boianjiu 2012) fathers are absent much to the same extent as most of the pieces discussed until now. One of the fathers, Avi, estranged from his family, makes his appearance late in the narrative, in the chapter whose title echoes that of the book: "And Then the People of Forever Are Not Afraid". Divorced from his wife he has not been involved in his children's lives for years.

Avi came to Israel from Libya when still a child, and yet he seems to continue to struggle with the adjustment, with society's expectations of him as a man. He longs for his life before Israel, where gender roles were distinct and there was no ambiguity, "where all the women were dark and young, and daughters like his didn't happen' (Boianjiu 2012, 237). Instead of dealing with the daily indignities of life in Israel where Ashkenazim were in charge,

> he would be riding on a horse with his daughter across the markets in Tripoli, buying her dark eyeliner and purple scarves. In Tripoli,

> girls started wearing makeup when they were as young as eight, and they always kept a scarf across their faces. (Boianjiu 2012, 239)

He had met his first wife in the transit camp. The story is both a familiar one of humiliation and a rather sweet one.

> When they met, they were standing naked on the asphalt outside the caravans with dozens of new refugees, covered in the DDT, the pesticide that rained on them from planes above. The Europeans in the immigration offices thought they could be carrying diseases. His future wife was naked and humiliated and white on the outside with chemicals, but dark in her eyes and throughout her heart, full of longing for the plane that had brought her. She was fourteen, four years older than he was. He promised her everything was going to be all right, even though he did not yet know her name. (Boianjiu 2012, 247-8)

Everything, however, is not all right. The wife was bedridden with depression, and the husband irate at her dysfunction, attacks her. They divorce; the father is subsequently denied custody and visitation rights after telling his daughter a story that ironically reads like a Zionist allegory.[10]

Emasculated by the circumstances, by his inability to understand or deal with his wife's depression, by the German social worker who persuades the wife to divorce him, by the system that keeps his children from him, Avi is forced to rethink his role. He needs to invent his own way of being a man, a husband, and especially, a father.

Of his three children, it is only with the middle one, Avishag, that he has any connection, and that connection is tenuous at best. His oldest, Daniel, dies by suicide at the beginning of the novel. Because of the divorce, the father had not seen him for most of the boy's life. The youngest, another daughter, has already made her way into mainstream Israeli society, leaving her family irrelevant: "[She] was now going by the dumb nickname 'Tzipi' and was happy" (Boianjiu 2012, 242). The point of view here is unspecified, whether that of the father or of Avishag – either is possible – but one reading would suggest it is a moment of agreement between the two and gestures to the potential of a relationship between them.

10 After being dispersed to the four corners of the earth, the people in his story are drowned by those amid whom they lived. "But some of them climbed out of the water… And then the ones that made it out of the water decided to go back to the country they left a million years before. They came back to the country from Africa and Russia and all over the world. [and then] They lived. … They lived like we live, They built houses and paved roads and planted trees. You know, they worked". (Boianjiu 2012, 245-6).

Avi has not been a presence in Avishag's life since he lost custody of the children. He has had only one encounter with her since the custody decision, an encounter that takes place during her army service. She is cold, hard, and borderline abusive both to the hapless soldier in her command whom she berates over the phone, and to her father. "And what, exactly do *you* want?" she asks him (Boianjiu 2012, 247). The ice cream he bought her seems ludicrously incongruous; it melts on the table as if mirroring the hopes he may have had for the meeting.

After Avishag is discharged from the army she takes to her bed, exhibiting signs of severe depression. The ex-wife, at her wit's end, appeals to Avi for help. There is, or has been, a connection between the father and his middle child, at least on the father's side: it is for her he learned to read. Their names – Avi (my father) and Avishag (possibly: my father's joy)[11] – signal their special connection. But they do not really know each other.

Initially he doesn't know what to do. He decides to buy his daughter a car, remembering that going for drives helped him after his army service. His ex-wife points out that the daughter doesn't drive, but he persists. He tells his daughter to smile, a tone-deaf response to someone suffering from depression, but that much more when it is an older man telling a younger woman to do so. During their time together he tries to get her to talk, seeking to define the problem. "He wanted there to be a certain thing wrong" (Boianjiu 2012, 234). Something wrong can be corrected, it is a problem to be fixed.

He begins to work out what it is he has to do, how it is he can be a father. There is progress toward communication. He understands her multiple apologies as her way of asking for help "This was her way of saying, *Do something*" (Boianjiu 2012, 243). He is still out of his element, but aware of being so. "He thought, *There is never a bad time to start*" (Boianjiu 2012, 250).

Despite her silence the father feels as if he learns something about her. Eventually he realizes "There was just her. There was nothing. There was just his daughter" (Boianjiu 2012, 244). Only when he stops trying to find something wrong that he can fix does he get her to act and react. She takes the wheel for the first time and drives them into the water. Together and separately, they face the worst possible outcome and swim to the shore. Just as he has realized there is just her, she realizes that she will always suffer from depression. Not the happiest of conclusions, but the breakthroughs on both of their parts suggest the possibility of a real relationship between them. For his

11 The etymology of the name – that of a biblical character who serves King David – is contested, sometimes parsed as 'father's mistake; my father erred', sometimes related to '*sigsug*', in Hebrew 'prosperity'.

part he is neither helpless nor heroic, neither providing a solution nor walking away. His ability to accept the situation for what it is, that it is not a problem to be solved or something broken to be fixed, heralds a new form of [Mizrahi] masculinity.

And there was his daughter, swimming, and he knew that she would eventually reach the shore, and him. She reached the shore, her clothes dripping water, and sat on the sand very close to him, in silence. He put his wet arm around her and his heart pulsated into her forehead, her unsteady breath slowing, becoming one with his. (Boianjiu 2012, 251-2).

10 In Place of Speech

There is a great dissonance in this.
(Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

The literature of fathers and sons plays against the backdrop of Zionism; the Zionist ethos replaces the father. The literature of fathers and daughters takes place mostly outside of this backdrop and ethos. In a paraphrase of a poem by Yehudah Amichai – the real victim of the akedah may be the daughter.[12]

While the works written by women tend to diverge from the Zionist narrative and are less likely to support patriarchal authority, stories of fathers and daughters in general are every bit as much about substitution as the akedah. The daughter may take the place of her mother; her lovers may replace the father.

More contemporary narratives offer us fathers whose roles are less defined, whose masculinity is at risk, and whose power is less unequivocal than their predecessors. Their inability to protect their daughters – from harm, death or loneliness – and the near impossibility of the father and daughter truly knowing each other helps contribute to an alternative narrative or alternate reading of the Zionist narrative. As the protagonist in Michael's novel (discussed and quoted above) observes, "the father and the daughter are a riddle inside a riddle" (Michael 2001, 177).

The silence that pervades these stories speaks to the impossibility of communication. While the silence between fathers and sons seems primarily a silence of stoicism, that of the daughters is the silence of suppression, subversion and even rebellion. The daughters demand to be heard or retreat into silence. "Lacking syntax and story", Lynda

12 "The real hero of the binding of Isaac was the ram | Who didn't know about the collusion between the others…" Yehudah Amichai, "The real Hero" (1996, 21).

Zwinger states, "the daughter speaks anyway, across the body (of the text, of the law, of the father)" (Zwinger 1991, 138).

There is also the silence, however, such as in the last scene quoted, from Shani Boianjiu's *The People of Forever Are Not Afraid*, where the silence signals communication that is deeper than words, a silence of communion. Only when the father is willing to cede some of his ego, to surrender his need to solve problems, to relinquish his role as authoritarian, disciplinarian, and patriarch, and to reformulate his masculinity, can this deeper, non-verbal level of communication be reached.

The stories by men focus on the difficulties of the father knowing his daughter. They explore the role of the father, its dimensions and its transformations over time. The women writers more often present the father-daughter relationship from the perspective of the daughter, adding more texture and complexity to it. Their works tend to question the established order, and even, as in the last text discussed, suggesting, creating, and conjuring a new way to father a daughter – an emergent masculinity.

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