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Othello in Zion*

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Abstract

What do a set of arguments drawing on Shakespeare's *Othello,* Agnieszka Holland's *Europa Europa* and Emile Habiby's novella, *The secret life of Saeed the pessoptimist* have to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Committed to the belief that cultural narratives – myths, epics and literature more broadly – offer insights which empirical approaches are unable to achieve, the argument presented here is that inside Israel's political imaginary lies a deep ambivalence around its origination. Comparing the discontinuities in Israel's national(ist) imagination with those in Othello's character, this essay asserts that solutions to complex situations found in and through fiction are not hopelessly fictional.

Keywords : Cultural Naratives; Epic; Holocaust; Identity; Myth.

Why does Israel not desire Peace?

No conflict has been more intractable perhaps than that between Israelis and Palestinians. For over 60 years the two sides have been locked in one of the most acrimonious conflicts in the region. An article published in Haaretz in 2014 stated boldly that Israel does not want peace because 'rejectionism is embedded in Israel's most primal beliefs. There, at the deepest level, lies the concept that this land [defined by the notion of 'greater Israel'] is destined for the Jews alone' (Levy). But the question worth asking is: *why* does it not desire peace? In what rational imagination can the current status quo of perpetual conflict be deemed preferable to peace? There are of course some strong and plausible answers to this question. They can range from historical, geo-political and ideological, to those that are anti-Semitic (and egregious for being so).

Such answers still beg the question though: why is peace less profitable

***Invited Paper**

than war? To argue that Israelis want all Palestinians to disappear, either off the face of the planet or just that strip of land on which Israel has drawn its borders, is to wonder about this desire in all its impossibility. Is the expulsion of Palestinians a real option? Can this account for the millions of individuals who serve in the Israeli army, or the pride of place the military has in Israeli society, influencing the political, cultural and economic spheres of life in the Jewish state (Allon, 1970/2019; Bresheeth-Žabner, 2020).

Of course, one answer is to place the blame not with the Israelis but with the Palestinians and their Arab neighbours. If Israel did not to feel so threatened; if a political organisation like Hamas did not have the dissolution of the state of Israel as one of its proclaimed objectives; if the Arab states had not historically invaded their nascent Jewish neighbour, then Israel would not feel the need to defend itself in this way. But this raises more questions and problems. For instance, many sympathisers with Israel (as indeed many of its critics too) cannot understand why countless Israelis fail to link their occupation of Palestinian territories, the building of illegal settlements and their ill treatment of their non-Jewish population with the precarious security they face.

Some may of course see the continuation of the Israel-Palestinian conflict as owing to the fact that Israel's security is *not* precarious. Only when another rival equal to Israel rises in the region, challenging Israel's military supremacy, will Israel desist from its injustices. This answer, clinical in its logic and evocative of the simple analogy of the playground bully, is worrying nonetheless, because for it, the answer to the violence of countless conflicts is greater violence still. As such, it is less an answer to our original question (why does Israel not desire peace?) and more a form of eschatology.

So the question around peace remains. Let us also be perfectly clear. The question *is* one for Israel because Israel is founded on land where there were people already living. One isn't going to set historical wrongs right by insisting on winding the clock back of course, but that said, the onus must be on Israel for this historic reason. Furthermore, Israel is in a position of power, and as the more powerful party, Israel must do more to broker peace. So again: why *does* Israel not desire peace?

Beyond the Empirical

In his contributing chapter to Om Dwivedi's *The Other India* (2012), Faisal

Devji reflects on the move away from representing conflict through the genres of epic and myth, towards the occupational practices of the historian. What is at stake is the possibility of deriving meaning *of* and *from* conflict in some broader sense than what the conventions of historical analysis allows. 'The *Iliad*, for example, which served as one of Europe's most important myths of conflict, allowed violence to be thought of in a more complex fashion than any historical account of modern time would have permitted'. The reason for this, Devji avers, is that under the rubric of historical analysis 'accounts of conflict are capable of producing only a certain kind of meaning, generally having to do with assigning causes and culpability for some episode of violence' (27).

Myths and epics themselves however, are not without their problems and Devji is fully aware of this. After all, narratives of conflicts may be mythologised in the sense of forming false representations and memories of reality. Another, more insidious outcome of the favouring of myths and epics over history-*proper*, is imagining conflict as some cosmic force whence the protagonists become wholly heroic or wholly demonic. Distilling conflict through the lens of myth can thus transform conflict from the worldly into the epic confrontation of good *versus* evil. This is significantly the case with the *Mahabharata* ('*Iliad*'s Sanskrit counterpart'), which Devji's essay focuses on and another Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. For the Hindu Right in India, especially in the late 1980s, both epics were harnessed for a communal-nationalism that saw the emergence of *Yatras* (religio-national processions) criss-cross the country, mapping it aggressively as Hindu (Oza 2012). Devji is not unaware of this and may claim that such cynical appropriation of these sacred texts or great feats of Indian literature is a form of political misappropriation.

What value then do myths and epics have over history as the lens through which we should see conflict? For one thing, the two may not be as different as this binary opposition implies. If Devji claims that myths and epics provide a more complex cogitation over the perennial problem of conflict, a certain historical analysis allied with a poststructuralist genealogical method can also assess the network of deeper disparate influences that shape the nature conflicts take. Taking inspiration from Devji's commitment to the value of reading myths and epics, and using a specific historical approach, this essay aims to delve beneath the avowedly empirical towards the murky depths of the unconscious, where strange impulses provide grit for the continuation of conflict.

Writing in a different context, Terry Eagleton suggests that sometimes

there may be 'no clear line between the pragmatic and the non-pragmatic' (2010, 98). We should take this view seriously when trying to find an answer to our original question because it helps move our focus from the empirical and pragmatic to what may be the conditions that underlie Israel's approach to the conflict in the Middle East. Opting for this does not mean one resigns oneself to the situation, given that if the cause(s) are not empirical one cannot hope to make concrete changes, since unconscious impulses seem too esoteric to alter. After all, while the unconscious may be a mysterious place it is not irrational, and by that I mean random and beyond scrutiny. The inclusion of the unconscious may open up new ways to approach intractable conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is here that myths and epics may prove insightful in that, being literary pieces, these texts figure conflict as a condition of human attitudes instead of a catalogue of cause and effect. In the *Mahabharata*, for instance, conflict is both an explicit result of contingent actions but also the conspicuous outcome of mental attitudes and human impulses that drive actions in certain directions.

To ask my original question around Israel, Palestine and peace is to ask what are the *unconscious* impulses that are driving Israeli actions away from peace, and it is this which this essay aims to explore.

Israel and the Holocaust

The trauma of the industrialized pogrom of European Jewry is vital for understanding the need *for* Israel in the Israeli imagination. But what it has also produced are two distinct attitudes within certain sectors of Israeli society. In his article for *The Guardian*, Owen Jones (2014) touched on this by quoting Angela Godfrey-Goldstein (a peace activist in Jerusalem) who said, '[the persecution the Jews faced has] bred a sense that people owe us, of "who are you to tell us what to do?"' This bitter attitude is supported by another attitude expressed by an unnamed human rights activist quoted in the same article:

> In Israeli society there is a victim mentality that is deeply, deeply rooted in the Holocaust and encouraged by those in power, even though at the moment we're not victims, we're an incredibly powerful country with an incredibly powerful military.

This notion of victimhood is clear, and why should it not be. The Jewish experience during the Holocaust and, the numerous other historical pogroms they faced, was horrific. Anyone who has heard the testimonies of

survivours cannot help but be moved.

Admitting this of course does not (should not) diminish the horrors that others across the world have faced or are facing. Nor is the trouble merely one that the activist in Jones' article highlights–that Israel is not a victim today but a powerful country with one of the most heavily armed militaries in the world. In fact, the memory of the Holocaust is more complex than merely one of victimhood. Furthermore, it isn't simply (or only) appropriated by a Zionist discourse cynically, as a way to cover its own brutalisation of the Palestinians. Instead, it operates in an intricate network of ideas and emotions; memories and experiences; fears and anxieties; pride and prejudices.

The Network

In an interview with Guernica magazine (2013), Ari Shavit, author of *My promised land: the triumph and tragedy of Isarel*, acknowledged that Palestinians deserve national and individual rights but demanded that Palestinians should grow up. 'There is a tendency in their political culture to be addicted to victimhood. And at the end of the day, with all due respect, the Jews are the ultimate victims of the twentieth century.' Shavit represents the strange dialectic that the memory of the Holocaust is engaged in. The claim of 'ultimate victimhood' stands uneasily with the claim that others are addicted to victimhood. It should be noted also that (politically) Shavit is a 'progressive', highlighting the degree to which this dialectic pervades the political imagination within Israel and its Zionist diaspora. Shavit continues with his advice to Palestinians:

> …the Jews who came to Israel are amazing proof of how people do not get addicted to their victimhood. They build a future. The Jewish-Zionist revenge was to live. Not to kill, not to commit suicide, and not to keep telling the story [of persecution and loss] over and over again. I wish that the Palestinians would learn from that side of Zionism. Because in this sense, Zionism was remarkable. Here you had the ultimate victims of the twentieth century who were saying, "Let's move on." People who came out of the [concentration] camps, and within a year or two got married and made children and sent their kids to schools, and from nothing did something. That's what the Palestinians should do now. It is my moral commitment and obligation to recognize Lydda [a Palestinian village that was destroyed during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war], but it's their commitment to overcome it. In a sense, I did

my share, they must do theirs.

The horror of the Holocaust confers upon Shavit his sense of ('ultimate') victimhood but offers Israel the discursive privilege of becoming an emblem of triumph. The victim turns victor. Yet, this curious discursive gymnastics forever hides the victim *inside* the victor too.

What is also hidden is a 'lack' within the social imaginary shaped by discourses (of which Shavit's book is both product and participant) that fashion these networks of associations. Another such example of 'hiding' is Agnieszka Holland's Golden Globe winner, *Europa Europa* (1990). Championed in David Denby's review (1991) for depicting the Holocaust as a trauma that was survived, Denby fails to mention (much like the film itself) that the triumph is premised on the devastation of another people. The film tells the story from the point of view of Solomon Perel, who is mistakenly identified as a gentile and sent to a Nazi military school. As a result, much of the narrative is concerned with his efforts to hide his Jewish identity. The story is narrated in retrospect from Israel, where Solomon escaped to at the end of World War II, but neither the film nor Denby's review points to the obvious problem in presenting Israel as a silver lining.

Taken differently, perhaps it is only through the erasure of Palestine that Israel could emerge. Shavit acknowledges something like this when he writes about the destruction of Palestinian towns and villages during the 1948 war: 'The Jewish state about to be born would not survive the external battle with the armed forces of the Arab nations if it did not first rid itself of the Palestinian population that endangered it from within' (2013, 110). In the Israeli-Zionist imagination, Palestinians need necessarily to be erased–figuratively–in order for the Jewish state to be born (and indeed for it to be sustained).

Yet how do you erase (by one estimate) 3.9 million people? The simple answer is: you don't. The erasure is discursive. In Israel's political discourse, the notion of erasure is displaced on to concrete symbols like weapons and tunnels, and only occasionally, by the more zealot commentators at least, extended in rhetoric to the Palestinian population. Yet this does not resolve the problem, it merely displaces it. This displacement can only occur if the foundational premise (taken quite literally)–the need for an erasure of Palestine/Palestinians for the emergence of Israel–is repressed. Such repression creates an unease; a lack, whereby one's self-identity remains forever incomplete.

'Purges and pogroms generally have some political point', writes Eagleton, but being true to his belief that the line between the pragmatic and non-pragmatic is often unclear, he avers that such heinous actions cannot be reduced to the desire to seize land or eliminate enemies of the state. 'If they are as savage as they are', he continues, 'it is because they usually involve not just land or power but people's identities' (2010, 98). This seems to me to be even truer when there is a lack at the very heart of one's identity, for then the harm and devastation one inflicts on those who incarnate the sign of one's lack is as a way to purge oneself of it. In the Israeli-Zionist imaginary, Palestine and Palestinians threaten to bring to the fore the repressed, unconscious network of associations lurking and directing Israel's actions.

If to ask why Israel does not desire peace is to ask what are the unconscious impulses that are driving its actions away from peace, part of the answer must be to do with a lack, a void, a deficiency at the very heart of Israel's national identity.

Identity as Fetish

This lack or void is not an easy answer and it is certainly not to deny the devastating effect Israel has. There may be a frightening void within Israel's social imaginary, but that should not be taken to mean Israel's political actions are innocuous. 'A hole is not something you can put in your pocket' writes Eagleton, 'but a hole in the head is real enough' (127).

The lack at the heart of Israel's national identity can be seen vividly in a video produced by Israeli journalist David Sheen and American author and journalist Max Blumenthal (2013). Sheen has been documenting issues relating to non-Jewish, mostly African, immigrants in Israel for years. What the video reveals is the way identity functions in Israel; it is an underlying factor that affects Israel's actions even beyond Palestine and Palestinians. However, what on the surface is a loud protestation of affirming one's identity (national/Jewish) reveals more and more to be the outcome of (what I am terming) a dangerous inner lack.

In one extract, a woman at an anti-African rally shouts loudly how frightened she is of Africans outside her home and believes they want to kill her: 'you can see it in their eyes' she says. Then, emboldened by the cheers of the crowd she declares, 'We're racist because we want to preserve our lives and our sanity. So I'm proud to be a racist–and it's our right to be racist!" This notion of 'right' resonates well with Angela Godfrey-Goldstein's

view that there is a certain bitter defiance in Israeli society ('"who are you to tell us what to do?"').

But as the video shows, this extends beyond the public to many mainstream Israeli politicians and state appointed Rabbis too. In an interview shown within the video, Michael Ben-Ari, a far right politician who until recently was an elected member of parliament, speaks candidly about the dangers of immigration into Israel. He suggests that a policy of welcoming different people from different parts of the world is one way to destroy Israel, a strategy he suggests of those hostile to the state. When questioned about this, he says that it will destroy Israel because it will cease to be a Jewish state. 'Our country,' he explains, 'is different from other countries. Our country is a Jewish state; a Jewish and democratic state. It's a very delicate balance. In some cases, the two contradict each other. If you bring in a million Africans it will no longer be Jewish…. This means Israel will soon be no more. Israel is dear to me.'

The 'delicate balance' is not just one that is political but mental. A certain care must be taken to ensure that what is unconscious remains so. Great energy is expended to maintain this balance or 'sanity' (in the words of the female protestor above). The specter of losing Israel's Jewish identity–Zionism's leading claim–must be held at bay, for 'if Zionism dies', writes Shavit, 'what will happen in the Land of Israel will be what has happened time after time in Europe: Jews will be Jews again' (2013, 113).

Once again, the victim must hide in the victor; the foundational premise for the Land of Israel must be repressed; the experience from Europe, so potent, belongs 'outside' and must not be brought 'inside' through the vectors of immigration and the Palestinian diaspora's right to return. Indeed, the latter two are mutually connected. In 2012 the Israeli parliament amended a 1954 law that was passed to prevent Palestinian refugees returning to their properties. Once amended, this law, termed the Anti-Infiltration Act, has been applied to new groups threatening Israel's Jewish identity by giving stringent powers to law enforcement agencies against those Israel terms 'infiltrators'. This label is particularly revealing since it casts refugees and economic migrants as something surreptitious. An extreme expression of this suspicion of African immigrants is captured in a clip in Sheen and Blumenthal's video where, at another anti-immigration rally, Miri Regev (the then [2012] Chair of the Interior Committee) says, 'Friends, today in the Knesset [Israeli Parliament] I said: The Sudanese are a cancer in our body'.

Such inflated and mephitic rhetoric rises from that very lack that gnaws away at Israel's political imaginary. It is a rhetoric that Israel's spokespersons have perfected through practice against Palestinians. The zealousness with which it is applied is directly proportional to the growing chasm within Israel's imagination from where such bile rises. Eagleton again: 'the kind of others who drive you to [the kind of action that Israel directed at Gaza in 2014 and in 2021] are usually those who for some reason have come to signify the terrible non-being at the core of oneself. It is the aching absence which you seek to stuff with fetishes, moral ideals, fantasies of purity, the manic will, the absolute state, the phallic figure of the Führer' (100).

Towards the end of Sheen and Blumenthal's video, the crew follow a gang of ultra-nationalists marching through south Tel Aviv and then, in the next shot, inside a convenience store where they harass frightened African customers and tell them to get out of their country. Actions like these spring directly from the racist colonial attitudes and apartheid policies which Israeli public figures propagate, beginning with Palestinians and now directed against African immigrants too. Such hatred, I argue, is born from an inner lack; a chasm within the social fabric of Israel and its political imaginary. Like all fundamentalisms then, those who cling so monstrously to their own identity seek to compensate a deep rooted deficiency by transforming identity into a fetish. Far from resolving the angst caused by this unconscious lack within the self, the fetishism of identity feeds an overblown fear of dissolution making self-preservation an all-consuming virtue.

Looking at Israel in this way–through the oblique, off-center perspective offered by an approach that draws on disciplines as varied as anthropology, poststructuralist (genealogical) historical analysis and psychoanalysis–does have precedence, most notably in early Zionist intellectual tradition itself. Eran Rolnik (2012) has written about Freud and the popularity of psychoanalysis in Israel, claiming that at the start at least, Zionism was characterized by an ideological eclecticism. 'Works by Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Spinoza and Freud were widely discussed and debated within the Jewish community. Zionist discourse deemed especially important those scholarly works that could offer alternatives to the traditional religious explanations for the existential plight of the Jewish people'. What was clear to the pioneers of Zionism though was that, as an ethnic minority in Europe, the Jew represented an 'atrophied and sickly body that required different physical and cultural conditions…to restore it to normality'. Zionist thinkers therefore 'conceptualised the Jewish problem in

medical or psychiatric terms' seeing as integral to the healing process 'the refurbishing of the Jewish mentality' (xxvii).

Yet what the intellectual project of Zionism did was create a social imaginary in Israel plagued with doublethink. The victor hides the victim; the premise upon which Israel (in its current form) must necessarily exist, needs also necessarily to be repressed; Jewish experience of Europe is to be excised, and yet European ideas (Jewish and gentile) are courted as attractive. Such discontinuities within Israel's social imaginary leads to an inner lack which drives the actions of Israel away from peace, even when a fair and peaceful settlement of its conflict with the Palestinians is its only true hope of survival. Whatever its supporters say, the appearance of vibrancy (a vibrant democracy; a vibrant LGBT destination) is the 'deceptive glow of the diseased. It is fever rather than vitality' that lies beneath the 'hectic flush on its visage' (Eagleton 2010, 123).

Othello in Zion

Discontinuities are integral to the characterisation of Shakespeare's Othello, the Moor of Venice. Measured and judicious at the start the play, *Othello* is the story of the rapid demise of its namesake. The audience witnesses his downfall but whether Shakespeare intends for us to feel simple pity at his tragedy is harder to say. Why does this noble Moor, whom everyone praises, tear himself apart?

Othello is unique amongst Shakespearean tragedies in many respects. Unlike Macbeth, Hamlet or King Lear, Othello is not noble by birth. He is a protagonist who is self-made; someone who has come through many adversities to arrive at a point in his life where, against all odds, he has reached a position of authority within a society that is neither his, nor particularly open to his kind. Indeed, when the Duke defends him against Barbantio (his father-in-law), who has brought Othello before the court on account of discovering the secret marriage between his daughter (Desdemona) and the black general, the Duke's praise is paradoxical: 'noble signior; if virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son-in-law is far more fair than black.'

For Barbantio, who, before he knew of their love affair, welcomed Othello into his house and befriended him, the interracial marriage is too much to stomach. Enraged, he confronts Othello with a group of soldiers, but unlike the violence for which Africans and Moors were known in Elizabethan society, Othello's response is poetic; 'keep up thy bright swords',

he intones, 'for the dew will rust them'. His charisma and charm is plain to see and yet he proclaims to be 'rude in speech and little blessed with that soft phrase of peace'. When Barbantio warns him about Desdemona ('Look to her Moor if thou hast eyes to see, she has deceived her father and may thee') his response is an unshakeable conviction in her love for him ('My life upon her faith!'). Soon though he begins to have serious and increasingly impulsive doubts–'I think my wife be honest, and think she is not'. Before this though, he is full of confidence and demonstrates great authority, as in act 3 scene 1 when a brawl breaks out among the officers in Cyprus:

> Why, how now, ho! from whence ariseth this?
> Are we turn'd Turks, and to ourselves do that
> Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
> For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl…Now, by heaven,
> My blood begins my safer guides to rule;
> And passion, having my best judgment collied,
> Assays to lead the way: if I once stir,
> Or do but lift this arm, the best of you
> Shall sink in my rebuke. Give me to know
> How this foul rout began

Still later on, when doubt about Desdemona's fidelity begins to plague his mind, he reflects upon what may have driven her away from him and returns to his race: 'Haply, for I am black, and have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have.' Commentators and literary theorists as different as Harold Bloom, Anne Whitehead and even W. H. Auden have long suggested that one of Othello's insecurities is his lack of refinement. His marshal qualities are developed in lieu of his social skills and this, they suggest, is one reason for his insecurity–when it comes to human relations, he is less confident and commands less authority.

There is another way to look at these discontinuities in Othello's character though, and each of the commentators mentioned above is not unaware of this. They, along with the likes of T. S. Eliot and playwright Caryl Phillips, also posit Othello's pride and race respectively as factors in his downfall. I want to draw these works together to suggest a parallel between Israel and Othello in order to argue that both are prompted by a deep rooted lack that leads to both being murderously violent in their action. In drawing this parallel, I appeal to Faisal Devji's suggestion that myths and epics–which I interpret to signify cultural narratives (hence my use of

Shakespeare)–offer unique insight into the nature of conflict.

Like Israel's constant appeals to its status as the only democracy in the Middle East, its humanitarian nature and, more recently, its claims of being a safe outpost for LGBT communities amidst hostile and homophobic Islamists (see Jasbir Puar 2007), Othello too boasts his credentials: 'My parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly' and, a little later, 'My services which I have done the state shall out-tongue his [Barbantio's] complaints'. This self-referential rhetoric is accompanied by expressions of false modesty, as when Othello proclaims a lack of refinement in speech, despite many an example to the contrary. This is partly what irritates Iago, the villain of the piece. For him, Othello seems too 'enraptured by the integrity of his own being' (Eagleton 2010, 87). There is, writes Eagleton, 'an air of monumental self-satisfaction' about Othello that is captured in his 'rotund, oratorical speech' in which Iago sees an exalted but bogus idealism (88).

Nowhere is this captured better than at the end of the play. Driven by furious jealousy that is aided by Iago's lies, Othello ends up killing Desdemona violently. When it dawns on him that he has been duped into murdering his innocent wife, he appeals to those around him:

> *Soft you; a word* or two before you go.
> I have done the state some service, and they know't.
> No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
> When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
> Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
> Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
> Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
> Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
> Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
> Albeit unused to the melting mood,
> Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
> Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;
> And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
> And smote *him, thus.*

Here again he begins by reminding his listeners of the 'service' he has done the state before venturing on a long, lyrical posturing. With an eye to his audience as Eagleton observes, Othello not only performs a *coup de theatre* (in the words of F. R. Leavis [1952/2018]) but attempts to leave reality itself. As T. S. Eliot (1932) put it, 'what Othello seems to be doing in making this speech is *cheering himself up.* He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve' (110). Isn't something like this at play when Israeli spokespersons insist that Hamas use human shields; that they happily and wilfully endanger civilians by insisting they remain in places that Israel has magnanimously warned it will mercilessly shell? An escape from reality for sure if not a *cheering one-self up* (where 'cheering oneself up' is read as assuaging one's own guilt).

Israel's persistence and doggedness for identity, for the need to narrate/ iterate her uniqueness is not dissimilar to Othello's self-proclamations. 'Because [Othello's] identity is so wholly externalised', writes Eagleton, 'it leaves a kind of absence or vacuum behind…. [What] Othello represents [is] a pompous plenitude of being which conceals an inner lack'. Just like Israel then, 'his exalted sense of self is a way of not having to confront the chaos of his inner being' (88-89).

The discontinuities in Othello's character arise precisely because of this inner lack and like Israel, this lack arises from his unconscious realisation of his precarious situation as a black man in White-Venetian society. At moments of anxiety and tension, he returns time and time again to his being black. Pitying Desdemona's supposed infidelity Othello says that her 'good' name is now 'begrimed and black as my own face'. Born a Muslim–as many have suggested[1]–Othello's conversion is one attempt at his assimilation. Another is his acceptance of European views regarding black people–their barbarism, cannibalism and the practice of 'arts inhibited'. In his speech, before turning the knife on himself, he recalls how in Aleppo he once smote a 'turbun'd Turk' for beating a Venetian. Quite apart from his antipathy for the Turk, this story may also refer allegorically to what he has just committed, namely, the murder of the White-Venetian Desdemona. In this interpretation, Othello may be speaking of himself in a double sense; in killing his wife he assumes the role of the 'circumcised dog' and in killing himself ('I took by the throat…and smote him thus') he, the assimilated outsider, is affecting upon his hidden self the punishment

1. See Ania Loomba, 2000; Daniel Viktus, 2019. For divergent views that do not read Othello as a Muslim see, Jerry Brotton, 2016 and Jane Hwang Degenhardt, 2010, who notes the ambiguity that prevents one from coming down on either side too firmly.

for traducing the state (Desdemona standing metonymically for Venice).

This *metryoshkan* quality of covert selves is captured well by F. R. Leavis (though challenged by Holloway 1961) when he argues that Iago's success in driving Othello mad with jealousy is not due to 'Iago's diabolic intellect [but] Othello's readiness to respond. Iago's power…is that he represents something that is in Othello–in Othello the husband of Desdemona: the essential traitor is within the gates' (1952/2018, 140).

Why then does Othello tear himself apart? Why is he duped by Iago so thoroughly? How is his inner lack (masked by his inflated sense of self) central to his murderous actions? Here Othello may be compared to Shylock, the other outsider in Shakespeare. 'The Venice of both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*', wrote W. H. Auden (1963), 'is a cosmopolitan society in which there are two kinds of social bond between its members, the bond of economic interest and the bond of personal friendship, which may coincide, run parallel to each other or conflict, and both plays are concerned with an extreme case of conflict' (214). But whereas Shylock is treated without disguise as an outsider, Othello's treatment is different. Outwardly at least, nobody mistreats or abuses him–as an effective military commander, he is after all necessary to the state. Yet that does not mean he is accepted as the many pejorative references to him behind his back make clear. He lives in a society that is deeply ambivalent about outsiders generally. Nonetheless, it is easier for Othello (unlike Shylock) to persuade himself that he is accepted and Desdemona's love for him seems to be proof of this. Yet Othello's marriage to Desdemona is overdetermined too. Were he to be merely jealous of the thought of infidelity his rage would have been understandable at least. But that he is so deeply shaken as to affect his very being (his epileptic fits) and his rapid descent from grandness to madness is sign of something else too. 'Though the imagery in which [Othello] expresses his jealousy is sexual' writes Auden, '…Othello's marriage is important to him less as a sexual relationship than as a symbol of being loved and accepted… The monster in his own mind too hideous to be shown is the fear he has so far repressed' (217).

Once more then, we are back to repressed ideas and emotions, monsters real-and-imagined, and identity. In Othello's case as in Israel's, murderous actions are driven by deep rooted challenges captured in a 'lack' or deficiency that plagues both. For Israel, it is at once Shylock *and* Othello. Outside the Jewish state it is Shylock, while inside it is the noble but unstable Moor. The challenge of maintaining the state however, given the presence of Palestinians (and African migrants) who incarnate this in-

completion of nationhood, means Israel's social imagination is as insecure as Othello's own. In this insecurity its identity becomes its fetish, just as Desdemona for Othello is a kind of fetish ('if he needs his wife's love, it is largely to block off a terrifying insight into himself' [Eagleton 2010, 91-92]). That being so, Israel is also at pains to remain part of the international community, as Othello is desperate to be accepted in Venetian society, which is why it reacts so strongly when challenged on this plane.

Omar (2013)

Much to the chagrin of commentators in Israel and beyond, Hany Abu-Assad's Oscar nominated *Omar* explores the challenges of living under occupation and a securitocracy like Israel (Gilroy 2011). In an interview with Reuters, Abu-Assad stated that the plot was partly inspired by Shakespeare's *Othello*. 'The problem with Othello was his insecurity…when you are in paranoia, you can't make rational decisions' (Williams 2013). 'The film', writes Williams, 'looks at the grind of life under Israeli military occupation: A young Palestinian lethally lashes out at the army and is punished with pressure to spy on his own side or end up in prison with no prospects of marrying the woman he loves. Betrayal, and the mistaken perception of betrayal, follow, with bleak and bloody consequences.' In *Omar* though, Abu-Asad assigns the role of Othello to the film's Palestinian namesake and, in one interpretation, gives the role of the villainous Iago to Rami, the Israeli agent who snares Omar in prison and whose name means 'to throw' in Arabic and 'exalted' in Hebrew.

Instead of presenting polarities though, what the film accomplishes is the intricate nature in which all participants in the Israel-Palestinian conflict are embroiled. Each is a foil to the 'other'. Lack and deficiency are everywhere–in Palestine because it is occupied and cannot breathe; must constantly repress its own emasculation; the fatiguing helplessness even as its seething anger propels action. Israel's lack meanwhile is even more repressed and underpins its impetuous brutality.

Even Iago has a deep rooted 'lack', only in his case his evil is to do with the fact he has embraced this vacuity, moving it from the unconscious to his consciousness where, instead of addressing it or renouncing it, he nurtures it. 'I am not what I am' he declares, happily and cynically. Indeed, perhaps it is the vacuity of self that draws Iago to Othello as his truest other-half. His determination to destroy Othello may not be a desire to destroy what virtue the noble Moor has, but an attraction to what he sees in Othello: himself. Evil, Eagleton may well agree, seeks to create more of

itself because unlike virtue which grows by 'yielding oneself as a gift to others' (114), evil is "vampiric", as Emilia in *Othello* puts it: 'it is a monster begot upon itself, born on itself'.

In act 3 scene 3 when Othello swears he will be avenged, Iago, feigning loyalty, joins him and swears that he will 'give up the execution of his wit, hands, heart to wronged Othello's service'. Shakespeare has the two characters kneel together on stage, emphasising the fact that these two have become one and the one mirrors the other. This symmetry becomes yet one more example of the *metryoshkan* nature of the lack within social imaginaries, for now Israel is not only victor/victim, Shylock/Othello, but there are those within its socio-political class who may be better seen as Iagos.

To return to the question of why Othello tears himself apart, is to ask in a different register, what drives Israel's actions away from peace? Iago (in the singular or the plural) is only a catalyst. The ground is fertile because of a deep rooted lack in one's own social imaginary and it is this deep seated lack that is the tumour in Israel's nationalist discourse.

A 'pessoptomist' Conclusion

In Emile Habiby's satirical novella, *The secret life of Saeed the pessoptimist*, the character of big man performs the role of Rami in Abu-Assad's *Omar*. Cunning and deceptive, big man recruits the dim-witted and cowardly Saeed as an informer, only to discard him later in prison where (true to the *metryoshkan* metaphor) he meets his alter ego, Saeed the *fidayeen* (redeemer). Before this meeting though, Saeed has a rude awakening to his fate.

Titled ironically, 'How Saeed finds himself in the midst of an Arabian-Shakespearean poetry circle', chapter 37 of Habiby's novella introduces us to the warden, who it turns out is a fan of Shakespeare. Upon hearing this, Saeed (well versed in Shakespeare) says, 'this made me feel most relaxed, and I settled into a chair' (43). At one point, however, the warden gets carried away in his recitation and re-enactment of Shakespeare and begins acting 'the role of Othello giving Desdemona the fatal kiss' (44) It is now that Saeed begins to feel uneasy and rightly so, carted off as he is by officers to a cell and beaten up. In assuming this role however, the warden performs a strange mimesis: An Israeli warden in charge of incarcerating Palestinians performs Israel's lack by assuming the very character through whom we may read Israel's volatile political imagination–or in the words of Norman Finkelstein, Israel's lunacy:

> Israel–I don't mean it pejoratively or viciously–is a crazy place. It's not altogether surprising that that happens, when a people has convinced itself that it is under siege, and its convinced itself it is under siege for unfair reasons (that you're being singled out, even though everybody else is guilty of those crimes too, or they so imagine), it's not altogether surprising that they act the way they do. (2014)

While this leads Finkelstein to believe that one cannot appeal to Israel's moral capacity ('power concedes nothing without demand' a quote he cites often) he does think (or advocates) that Israel can be pushed to realise its own interest and compelled to see that the occupation is just not worth it. Efforts by public intellectuals, politicians and journalists moved by the plight of the Gazans, and millions of ordinary activists boycotting and protesting is part of this pressure to push Israel to realise that its own long term survival can only come through peace.

Writing in Haaretz, Levy may be right – Israel may not want peace but knowing why this is the case is an important step to devising ways to achieve it. Otherwise, just as Othello murdered Desdemona, so Israel will murder what it wants most, a homeland for the Jews.

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