

# The Bipolar Dichotomy in The Representation of Ageing in the Amos Oz Canon

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## Abstract

*There is no doubt that Amos Oz, winner of the 1998 Israel Prize for literature, is the country's most successful and internationally celebrated author. A summa of his resonant popularity in the media and academia is evidenced by the Oz Archive at Ben Gurion University boasting over 25,000 articles dealing with his works. As a pilot endeavor, this article examines the negative prejudices associated with female ageing and elderliness as depicted in Oz's canon.*

There is no doubt that Amos Oz, winner of the 1998 Israel Prize for literature, is the country's most successful and internationally celebrated author. A persona whose fictional universe and polemical rhetoric have conspicuously been on display, front and center, for almost thirty years, he has become a cultural icon, moniker etched in the consciousness of local and international readers alike. He has been recently awarded a knighthood by the French government, adding to an Order of Arts and Letters and the International Peace Prize of the German Publishers Association. Winning every possible award and accolade in Israel, a summa of his resonant popularity in the media and academia is evidenced by the Oz archive at Ben Gurion University boasting over 25,000 articles dealing with his work- a critical surfeit unparalleled thus far in Israeli literary history. In the apt words of Asaf Inbary, "He is the most representative Israeli author of all times, the ambassador of Hebrew literature. His world wide acclaim adds another layer to the prestige we feel for him. It is nice to know that through him, a model of a dear son endowed with all these attributes, the world is looking at us." Indeed, he has often been hailed by the world press as the modern prophet of Israel, due to his enlightened and common sense on a passel of issues affecting Israel and its Middle East neighbors.

Oz's appeal is sufficiently modish to whet the appetite of the masses and eclectically stylistic (his books are a compendium of genres) for scholars to mull over its multi-textured symbology and humanistic exploration of the *zeitgeist*. A dialectician, he is without peer in exploring the inveterate bi-polar divisions within the populace, limning the conflict between religious and secular, left and right, the Arab Israeli conflict, Sephardi and Ashkenazi tensions, Zionism and the realities of Israeli life. At the same time, he x-rays the deep recesses of the human landscape to depict the interior struggle between the primal and rational forces bubbling within the human soul. Indeed, this may explain his enduring appeal abroad. For despite having his representations guyed to Israeli actualities, through his lyrical and mesmerizing prose, Oz weaves a cosmic quilt, foregrounding emotional turbulence and communal patterns identifiable in any pluralistic society.

Lamentably, however, the fiction of this most important author, has been, relatively speaking, insulated from the magnifying glass of feminist scholarship and shielded from the ongoing dialogue between literature and gender hermeneutics. Despite the abundance of books and essay collections examining his letters, a feminist reappraisal of Oz's oeuvre has been noticeably missing, with only a small amount of research to be found, emphasizing the bold and serious effort required by both male and female academics to revivify this neglected area.

This, to a large extent, provided the point of departure for this article, in a sense, a pilot work. The reason being that its thesis has been informed by a methodological feminist approach to re-examine almost all of the Amos Oz diegesis, an endeavour which, to our knowledge has never been fully undertaken before. Specifically, the focus of this survey is to re-evaluate the author's narratives through feminist lenses, to essentially re-enter its fictional dimensions and strategies with the aim of uncovering misogynous presumptions and distorted images of women relating to rape and violence. In the questions raised herein we have attempted to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies of ageing and their commensurate forms of ideas, values and syntax that for so long have served to transfer cultural and social antifeminist representations of women into textual discourse.

Negative prejudices associated with female elderliness and ageing are embedded and entrenched in the masculine models and conceptions, which pulsate through the corpus of male modes of representation. An examination of this discourse reveals a transparent bias and unevenness in the manner by which the ageing process in women is depicted, and the commensurate deprivation of femininity that those texts tend to accentuate. Foremost among the constructions of ageing in womanliness is the lack of multiplicity of representations - getting old is enacted not in a collage of differences but in a monotonous, uniformed, essentialist fashion that emphasises women's physical coarse rusticity and expunction of cognitive faculty. The thread that runs through most of the stories is the commonality and uniformity of the characterisations. In her study of the societal beliefs and attitudes displayed towards older woman, and the cultural stereotypes in literature, Simone De Beauvoir collectively argues that because men view woman's purpose in life as that of an erotic object, when she grows old and ugly she forfeits the role and place that society allotted her and becomes a *monstrum* that leads to disgust and even fear" (1972). Likewise, Sontag asserts that: "...there is a double standard about ageing that denounces women with special severity. Society is much more permissive about ageing in men... Men are allowed to 'age', without penalty, in several ways that woman are not" (1978, p. 73).

The edifice of Oz's oeuvre reveals a pernicious devaluation and a general disparagement of old age in his heroines, which involves the mapping out of a series of unflattering descriptions detailing the effects of ageing on women - their loss of beauty and attractiveness - elements so identified with womanhood in a masculine hegemony that idealises femininity only in the image of the sexually attractive young woman. In the words of Germaine Greer: "...a decayed beauty is possibly more tormented than any other female stereotype" (1970, p. 270).

Oz recreates long standing cultural dichotomies by theorising older woman as the 'other' both in an ontological and physical sense. Appositely, Sontag maintains that, "...for most women, ageing means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification" (1978 p.73), a motif, to which Oz returns again and again. At the same time, he seems to revel in explicitly sketching the aesthetic and physical impact ageing brings upon older women, and underpins his skewed construction by refraining from applying a contrapuntal process to his male protagonists. Moreover, while his middle-aged and older male characters are venerated for continuing to be mentally strong and socially active, the female characters bow out of social life and are shown to be in a depressing decline. In a sense, this dichotomy reflects the overall effacing of women that bristles throughout his work, and which highlights his reductionist endeavours to amplify the phallogocentric dualist belief that femininity and masculinity are physically and intellectually diametrically opposed.

Alexander Gideon, the male protagonist of the epistolary novel *Black Box* (Oz, 1993a) is fond of abusing his ex-wife through a series of vituperative letters. In one elongated passage he describes his misogynous vision of the way a woman ages:

Madame Sommo. You will age. You will put on a lot of weight. Your golden hair will grow dull. You will have to bleach it ghastly peroxide blond. As long as you don't take to wearing a head scarf. You will have to drown the smells of your degenerating body in deodorants. Your breasts will fill with fat, and your dazzling bosom... will rise up to meet your chin. Which for its part will lengthen and go half way to meet the bosom. The nipples will become pale and bloated, like drowned corpses. Your legs will swell. A network of varicose veins will spread from your hip to foot. The corsets in which you will be obliged to contain your cascades of flesh will groan fit to burst as you fasten them. Your posterior will become beastlike. Your vulva will flap and stink. Even a virgin soldier or a retarded youngster will flee from your charms as from the wild advances of a female hippopotamus in heat. (Ibid., p. 91)

Yonathan Lifshits, of *A Perfect Peace* (Oz, 1993c) also gleefully reflects how his young wife will physically degenerate:

This time it's hopeless and everything is all wrong. Just look at her, that skin sagging on her neck, behind her tiny ears, underneath her adorable chin, all those places where she is drying out and cracking like weathered paint or an old shoe. It's the beginning of her old age and there's not a thing she can do about it. Nothing can save her...Gone forever. The end. And I don't feel in the least bit sorry for her... (Ibid., pp. 58-59)

Other heroes muse about the deterioration of the female body, revealing an undercurrent of efforts by the author to stress the ugliness and inevitability of female ageing. The words of the principal of *Fima* (Oz, 1993b) are just such an example. Predictably enough, his reflections are veiled as innocuous epiphanies, which he suddenly experiences: "As he said this, he observed something that he had never noticed before: Shula, whom he dated more than thirty years ago...

who at that time had a fragile girlish beauty, had aged and gone quite grey. In fact her thighs had grown so fat that she looked like an ultra pious woman worn out by childbearing who accepts her decrepitude with total resignation" (Ibid., p. 302).

This theme finds another fertile ground in the description of Lisa and Avigail in *To Know A Woman* (Oz, 1992a) who are caricatured by the ever present narrator: "At a second glance one could see the first in Avigail of a tendency to rotundity and a Slavic ruddiness, whereas Lisa looked as though she might shrivel away" (Ibid., p. 12); "She was followed by his mother, with a grumpy expression and sunken lips" (Ibid., p. 118); "Generally his mother sat opposite him in an armchair, embroidering or knitting, with her narrow grey eyes and her tight sunken lips making her look hard and resentful" (Ibid., p. 35). In a similar fashion, Ezra Berger of *Elsewhere Perhaps* (Oz, 1973) broods maliciously over his wife's ageing image: "His thoughts wander. Bronka's' not alone now. In my room. In my bed. Grandma. Big hips. Thinking about her body. Hair. What a belly. 'Belly like a mound of wheat'-huh! Old dumpling" (Ibid., p. 58)

Another central tenet to the Oz critique of older woman is the persistent emphasis on the biological referent inherent in the severe ageing mutation to supposedly occur in females. This literary projection has become part and parcel of the derogation of the female form in the dominant gender binarism of limiting conceptions. <sup>(1)</sup> It is clearly intended to exemplify the invented dissonant biological polarity between men and women. Consider, for instance, the manner by which Aunt Janya in *My Michael* (Oz, 1991) is delineated as the object of ridicule through the constant references to her mannish appearance: "She brushed my cheeks with her lips and her downy moustache... I saw a short-fingered, masculine hand" (Ibid., p. 59); "When she came to stay with us for the feast of Succoth, Aunt Janya terrified me. Heavy smoking had made her voice coarser and deeper... Her hair had become thin and grey. Her face was like the face of a bad-tempered old man" (Ibid., p. 193). Equally, Hava Lifshitz of *A Perfect Peace* (Oz, 1993c) does not escape the author's monolithic construction: "An obviously ageing woman... a wispy moustache above lips perpetually pursed..." (Ibid., p. 246); "She was a short, energetic woman with masculine, close cropped, greyish white hair and a clenched mouth" (Ibid., p. 50). This all-pervading demeaning of old women's looks gathers added material from the initial portrayal of Zeshka Sirkin in *Before His Time* (Oz, 1992b) whom fellow members have nicknamed the owl: "She was an old, wrinkled woman with sunken eyes like an owl's... Her body was stunted, shrivelled" (Ibid., p. 63-64). In *A Hollow Stone* (Oz, 1992b) Batya Pinski, repeatedly referred to in the story as the 'old woman' and the 'old witch' by the children of the Kibbutz, is also stigmatised by her loss of physical attractiveness, and joins the gaggle of female characters to have their decrepit looks caricatured and accentuated: "Her mouth hung open revealing gaps in her teeth. A small drop hung between her nose and her and upper lip where a slight moustache had begun to grow during those bad years" (Ibid., p. 142). Put bluntly, it is pointed out that once her loveliness began to fade and her position as the Kibbutz beauty dissipated, Batya had nothing of value to offer her community. Now, ugly and sexless, she

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive analysis of this trend, See, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Everyman's Library, 1993): pp. 605-627.

vaingloriously attempts to convince herself that she is still capable of attracting attention with her looks: "She went to the sink and washed her face repeatedly in cold water as if to mortify her flesh. Then she ran her bony fingers over her face and hair in the mirror and said aloud, There, there, you're a good girl, you're lovable, don't worry, everything's all right" (Ibid., p. 163). While the narrator in *Elsewhere Perhaps* (Oz, 1973) is unwilling to explore the deep recesses of the older women of the Kibbutz, he is quite prepared to relentlessly engage in a patronising and humiliating appraisal of their unrefined physiological attributes:

Let us now turn to their companions, the older woman... Their appearance is saddening, if only for an instant... At first sight, though, those women have a rather coarse look. All things considered they look very much like the men, with their wrinkled faces... the stern network of furrows round their mouths, their dark, indelicate skin, their grey or white or even thinning hair... Do not make the mistake of thinking that some of them have a cruel look... The expression which you interpret as one of cruelty is really one of asceticism. (Ibid., p. 34).

Immediately preceding the above quoted extract is a portrait of the older men. Notice the dissimilitude and the reinscription of the patriarchal based model of the older male in the following snapshot: "...their general appearance is one of strength and physical well-being. They are tanned; their features are open and forceful... All of them... radiate a feeling of security and contentment in their faces, and in their gait, as well, you see the signs of lively intellect. They are lively men." (Ibid., pp. 33-34)

In her essay on the pestiferous double standard in mass culture, Sontag points out that society treats lines in a man's face as signifiers of characters, as signs of maturity and emotional strength and that the underlying tone of characterisation is fundamentally positive (1978, p. 78). In this regard, Shimshon Sheinbaum of the *Way of the Wind* (Oz, 1992b) may perhaps be the most striking personification of this: "The mosaic of wrinkles on his face enriched his expression with rare blend of pride, thoughtfulness, and a trace of well controlled irony. And his bushy white eyebrows suggested a saint in a Russian icon" (Ibid., pp. 51-52). Matityahu Damakov of *Where the Jackals Howl* (1992b) is another example of the prevailing discrepancy. The pivotal abominations of the body over scored in earlier depictions of the women are noticeably absent; Damakov's physique is glorified in a constant barrage of sexually fetishising terms: "Matityahu Damakov's body is a cunning piece of craftsmanship. His torso is lean, boyish strong, almost unnaturally agile. What impression does such a body make on women? in men it arouses a sense of nervous discomfort" (Ibid., p. 6). Or, "In the daytime he works in the smithy, stripped to the waist and gleaming with sweat, muscles dancing beneath the taut skin like steel springs" (Ibid.). Moreover, when the sixteen-year-old Galila visits his room, his monkeylike body arouses her sexual desire, culminating in a nonsensical climax that sees the two almost copulating (Ibid., p.19). One of the introductory scenes to the sixty year old Dov Sirkin in *Before His Time* (Oz, 1992b) describes a masculine figure that belies its years and weak heart: "He was a grey man: grey eyes, face and hair. But he almost invariably chose to wear a blue shirt of the kind favoured by young athletes. Hidden beneath his shirt was a strong and hairy torso, crisscrossed with

sinews... he seemed still in his prime, and he had the built of a stevedore" (Ibid., p. 74). The images and literary rhetoric that liquidate a woman's sexual persona are eschewed in the male hero's characterisation; thereby promoting the idea that masculinity is detached from oldness.

If it is not a male character that opprobriously expresses disgust or aversion of the degenerative physical effects of ageing, Oz weaves into the tapestry of the text a female voice to pour scorn on her body and lament its inevitable decline. The middle-aged Bronka Berger of *Elsewhere Perhaps* (Oz, 1973) recreates and validates age related negative biological traits firmly anchored in phalocratic tradition, through a dramatic passage:

Bronka thinks about her body. With a feeling of disgust... She can almost feel, through the material, the swollen veins, the ugly black hair on her legs, the red rash. They say beautiful women find old age hard to bear... But years ago I didn't think about my body like this; now I think about it, and I don't like it... I sometimes have the feeling that a strange, ugly woman is sleeping in my bed. I can smell her body. She sweats. She has a nasty, smelly discharge. She's not well. She smells unhealthy. She has something wrong inside of her (Ibid., p. 44).

Oz again dives into stereotypical waters in his psycho-social portrayal of the two grandmothers in *To Know A Woman* (Oz, 1992a) of which Moked (1989) has said: "These women characters are very convincing as long as the description is of body wrinkle, a single statement or its general movement. But in fact... only one internal tension is conveyed, only one character is told from the inside: Yoel" (Ibid., p. 26). It is as if all of the old clichés have come together to create a coherent archetype in which the author recycles the standard cluster of images and traits of the aged: loss of memory, incontinence and childlike behaviour. Diegestically, for example, the two women settle in the kids' bedroom, but metaphorically, they assume the place of the children in the story. And indeed, at times they behave like children, quarrelling about the pronunciation of words such as 'sleep' with Lisa complaining that Netta, her granddaughter, is mocking her, or haranguing Yoel about his hair or plans for the future (Ibid., pp. 97-98). Appropriately, the central protagonist Yoel, treats the situation and its protagonists like a stern father rebuking his children: "'That's enough' said Yoel. 'What is all this? That'll do now. If it goes on like this they'll have to send the peace keeping troops in'" (Ibid., p. 95). Predictably enough, Lisa is freighted with a deterioration of memory condition, and a hint that she may not be mentally competent: "Shall I bring your medicine out for you? – No, bring me some poison instead ... where are you going to put me? outside in the garden shed? or in a old people's home?" (Ibid., p. 252); "Sorry to intrude, but we must have a little chat about your mother's condition... We can't brush it aside. It would be wrong to pretend that she is quite normal... Can't you see that she's getting more and more scatterbrained by the day?" (Ibid., pp. 157-158). Moreover, the two are customarily shackled to the predominantly negative and condescending social milieu attributed to old women -here, volunteering to work at a deaf-mute institution or taking part in a party for The Open Heart association. To put it simply, Lisa and Avigail are, as Boshes says: "...quite stereotypical figures, who seem to be there simply for decoration purposes only" (Boshes, 1989).

Hendricks (1978) believes that, "Indicative of the range of commonly held stereotypes about the elderly is the belief that most older people are living isolated lives beset by serious health problems, causing them to be emotionally distraught. Just as widespread are the ideas that women experience psychological trauma with the onset of the so called empty [nest] years" (Ibid., p. 60).

Batya Pinski of a *Hollow Stone* (1992b) is just such an example. The old widow embodies within her character a combination of genophobic elements taken to their extreme, which deprive her of a mimetic gendered feminine self and depict her as a bad tempered old woman in a dejected and catastrophic state. Cloistered in her home, antisocial, and devoid of a meaningful life, she is a contemptuous image in the Kibbutz. Her emasculation is amplified by the structure of the story, which opens with a particularly cruel image, emblematic of this motif:

Batya Pinski was catching flies... But her mind was not on the job, and some of the flies continued to wriggle even after they were dropped into the enamel mug... Batya Pinski sliced the dead flies at the bottom of the mug with a penknife... At last the old woman removed the glass cover and poured the mess of crushed flies into the aquarium. (Ibid., pp. 140-141)

The narrator sardonically points out that over the years Batya has been able to hone and develop amazing skills - counting the copious fish in her aquarium, or anticipating the route each one will take. Derisively named by the children of the Kibbutz Baba Yaga (the witch) because of her ugliness and habit of loudly talking to herself in a croaked voice, her *raison d'être* and entire purpose in life is centred around a dedication, which she insists is to be included in a forthcoming book of her late husband's essays (Ibid., pp. 152-153). Alienated from the Kibbutz community, and ensconced in her solitary and delusional world, she is convinced that the Kibbutz Administration has forgotten her and the dedication she has convinced herself she deserves. Consequently, in a pivotal scene, symptomatic of the character assassination in the narrative, Batya lashes out at the Secretary General:

Batya Pinski darted out of the bushes and tapped on the window with a wrinkled fist. The Secretary General was momentarily alarmed and covered his face with his hands. Then he opened his eyes and stared at the *terrifying figure outside*... 'don't you dare, Abramek, don't you dare leave out the dedication, or I'll scratch your eyes out and I'll raise such a stink that the whole country will sit up and take notice,' Batya screeched without pausing to draw breath. (Ibid., p. 165). (My italics, D.A)

Realising that she is not fully mentally competent, and wanting to avoid a scene, Felix assures the old woman that her fear and hostility is misplaced, that the Kibbutz will honour its promise. Now, we are told, with the same ironic tone with which the story began, that Batya is once again free to return to her worthwhile pursuits - catching flies around her room and feeding them to the fish (Ibid., p. 166). Consider, in contrast, the delineation of the seventy-five year old Shimshon Sheinbaum in *The Way of the Wind* (1992b), most notably the way he escapes the same fate

accorded to Batya Pinski by the author. Such a comparison points up the unevenness in the representation of the male and female characters. It is significant that despite his years, Shimshon is still an exalted and admired figure in the Kibbutz: "Old age is still far off. At seventy-five he still has hair as thick as ever, and his muscles are firm and powerful. His eyes are alert, his mind attentive. His strong, dry, slightly cracked voice still works wonders on women of all ages. His bearing is restrained, his manner modest" (Ibid., p. 48). Wherein Batya was rendered mentally brittle and socially obsolete, Shimshon has no blemishes on his character. Early into his seventies he insists on continuing his menial jobs: gardening, night watching, labouring in the kitchen and in the harvest. Furthermore, his status as the leading thinker of the labour movement has never been challenged (Ibid., p. 43). In short, he is a "...single complex of vision and execution" (Ibid). Even further, when aged fifty-six, we are told, and still extremely virile, he decided it was advantageous that he has a son to serve as his heir. He therefore, "conquered" (Ibid., p. 44) a twenty-two year old Kibbutz girl, who once bore him, a son was sent back to her room like a disposable womb. (Ibid).

The repeated belittlement and denigration, both intellectually and physically, of the older heroines in Oz's corpus of work reifies and reactivates the literary practice of diminishing women's worth and affirmative identity in society by obsessively honing in on the biological aspect of their being, and conceptualising it as the elemental factor in their character. In a sexist society where the look is the key for woman and the bodice is both an artifice and surface to be gazed upon, ageing in women is viewed by males with disdain. Oz attempts to stave off sexual plurality by denying older women their femininity and humanity, often perceiving them as less than their male counterparts. Most obviously, there is no ultimate leveller - while the older men are endowed with emotional strength, the women are diminished by a victimisation that condemns them with literary epithets as inelegant and worthless, and by a reinforcement of the impression that their self-image and cognitive capability is predominantly negative. Although perhaps an over-reaching metaphor, the aged in the Oz narratives stand as an emblem of the male perceived inadequacy of the female body and mind, which in gender hierarchies occupy a prominent position only when signifying youth, grace and beauty - the quintessential antithesis to the subjects of this present discussion.

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