

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

הצעת מחקר לתואר השני:

סיפורי בנייה: יחסי גומלין בין מרחב ודמות ברומן הרב קולי
העכשווי

בראה עבד אלחי

ת.ז. 042341982

מנחה: ד"ר דניאל פלדמן

Bar-Ilan University

Department of English Literature and Linguistics

M.A. Thesis Proposal:

**Building Stories: The Relationship between Character
and Place in Contemporary Polyphonic Novels**

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Advisor: Dr. Daniel Feldman

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Introduction

See the wonderful architecture! This building was copied to the last detail from a building I saw in le Quartier latin in Paris [...] You know, Busayna, I feel as though I owned the Yacoubian Building. I'm the longest resident in it. I know the history of every individual and every square meter in the building. I've spent most of my life in it. I lived my best days in it and I feel as though it's part of me. The day this building's demolished or something happens to it, that'll be the day I die. (Alaa Al Aswany 165)

Meet Zaki Bey el Dessouki - a sixty-five-year-old failed engineer unfolding the nature of his relationship with the Yacoubian Building and relating his utter and sincere identification with the edifice that witnessed the path his life took since he opened his engineering office in that same building upon his return to Egypt from France in the late 1940s. Although he lives with his sister Dawlat in an apartment located in Baehler Passage, Zaki Bey spends his free time each day in his office in the Yacoubian Building. It is this building that continues to provide a sanctuary for a man with many idiosyncrasies. It offers a refuge in which Zaki Bey embraces and accepts his weaknesses. It also triggers Zaki Bey's most nostalgic reminiscences on a glorious past when "Cairo was like Europe" (162).

Apart from the long-term residency, the heart of Zaki Bey's identification with the titular apartment building of Alaa Al Aswany's landmark novel *The Yacoubian Building* (2002) lies in the fact that, similar to himself, the building suffered a blow brought about by the Revolution of 1952. At the completion of its construction in 1936, the building was considered an "architectural gem," "where the cream of the society of those days took up residence" (11). However, the transformation that Egypt was subject to following the

revolution manifests itself on the building, which loses its splendor with the departure of its aristocratic and high-class residents. Most importantly, the roof of the building bears witness to the development of a new community similar to other popular ones in Egypt. Along the same lines, at the eruption of the revolution, Zaki Bey's father, Prime Minister Abd el Aal Basha Dessouki, was arrested and his possessions confiscated, leaving Zaki Bey with little income and eliminating any prospects of his following his father's tracks in becoming a politician. Thus, Zaki Bey and the Yacoubian Building share a common downfall and gloomy fate.

The Yacoubian Building, then, is more than a mere architectural structure that offers the characters in Al Aswany's novel a place of residence or work. It is a constructed literary and geographic space where Al Awsany grants the reader access into the lives of the novel's characters, and the reader, in turn, can chart its multiple versions through the various roles it assumes in the characters' lives. The building serves not only as a backdrop but as a signpost for narrative events in this text. While some characters live their lives within its premises, others long to flee the air of oppression and injustice it diffuses.

In this thesis, I am interested in exploring the relationship between character and space as a thematic device in contemporary narrative. Through a comparative reading of the *Yacoubian Building* and *Homesick* by Eshkol Nevo, I will study the implications of using this aesthetic to structure polyphonic narration in which stories parallel and sometimes intersect.

Aims and General Description

Analyzing and comparing *The Yacoubian Building* (2002) by the Egyptian writer Alaa Al Aswany and *Homesick* (2004) by the Israeli writer Eshkol Nevo, I aim to investigate how elements of character and space interact in contemporary novels that use a strategy of polyphonic narration. I will examine the ways in which the mix of space, character and narration formulates a thematic unity that constructs contemporary narrative on the foundations of multiple perspectives and shared built space. Addressing relevant literary criticism and theory about these constructs, I will consider how an interplay between character and place can create a defining literary experience. In addition to illustrating the specific function of this relationship in Nevo and Al Aswany's novels, I will also explain its broader utility, thereby contributing to the existing critical discourse about the aesthetics of "space" in literature.

Methodology

My research strategy will be based on a close reading and comparative analysis of two contemporary novels. These novels are examples of narrative structures that use "place" as key to deliver a broad perspective on geographical spaces that serve as their textual settings. I will draw on existing criticism on the aesthetics of "space" in literature as well as on the body of scholarship on contemporary Israeli and Egyptian fiction. I will also use relevant theoretical tools in the field of narratology, specifically those pertaining to polyphonic narration, in order to gain an understanding of how this narrative device contributes to the interaction between "space" and character in narrative structures in order to create a theme.

Scholarly and Critical Background

■ The Aesthetics of “Space” and “Place”

Of valuable insight to this research is the body of scholarship that investigates human perceptions of “space”, “place” and “home.” Gaston Bachelard, Yi-Fu Tuan and J. Nicholas Entrikin stress the centrality of human experience in the process of shaping, defining and drawing distinctions between aspects of “space”, “place” and “home”; they identify and explain different elements that influence human interpretations and evaluations of those concepts. In fact, Bachelard maintains that the “house” precedes, enables and nurtures man’s being, existence and becoming: “without it, man would be a dispersed being [...] ‘Before he is cast into the world,’ as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house” (7). Going beyond man’s everyday experiences of various “spaces” and “places” and penetrating innermost human thoughts, these works are necessary to my analysis of the two literary texts centered on buildings and houses infused with human emotions, relationships and history.

■ Contemporary Israeli Fiction and Eshkol Nevo

Scholarship on contemporary Israeli fiction is extensive and varied, but again, for the purposes of this research, I will draw on those works that focus on the treatment of “space,” “place” and “home” in the contemporary Israeli novel. Karen Grumberg, Barbara Mann, Vered Weiss, Ayal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu have all contributed to the discourse on the aesthetics of space in Israeli narrative, which oftentimes involves concepts of identity and Zionism.

It is very important to establish here that there is a consensus among those critics and others, such as Michael Gluzman, Hannan Hever and Rachel S. Harris, that Jewish literature has always played a crucial role in the process of nation-building, the formation and

reformation of the Jewish-Israeli identity. Michael Gluzman states that “in the time of nation-building, the alleged value of literary texts is inextricably entangled with the process of identity formation” (1) and that “the efforts to solidify the community’s identity via literary texts derives, as David Lloyd asserts, from the act that ‘literary culture is conceived as not merely offering a path towards the resolution, but the resolution itself of the problems of subjective and political identity’” (2). Congruently engaged in the process of reestablishing the modern Israeli literary canon, Hanan Hever explains, the role of literature exceeds that of reflecting sociopolitical realities and rather reinforces political ideologies. This context offers a frame for many contemporary Israeli writers, and it is within this context that critics read and discuss Eshkol Nevo’s novels.

As far as I know, there are only three critics who directly comment on Eshkol Nevo and his novels and this narrow body of criticism reinforces my interpretation of *Homesick* as well as *The Yacoubian Building*. Both Rachel S. Harris and Smadar Shiffman include Nevo in a new generation of Israeli writers who evince political activism and responsibility through their writings. Smadar Shiffman maintains that Nevo’s complex fusion of the “public” and the “private” is a dominant approach in contemporary Hebrew literature that emerges out of the poet, author or playwright’s response to the public’s demands that they “carry a moral beacon, if not actually fulfill the role of a prophet” (80). That, in turn, advances Shiffman’s argument that “like Siamese twins, contemporary Hebrew literature and the state of the nation cling to each other, recoiling at the prospect of a severance” (70).

Rachel S. Harris points out that Nevo offers a conception of an emerging transcultural generation of Israeli writers “torn between an Israeli identity, with its increasing inclusive and polyphonic state, and a Jewish identity with diasporic roots” (1). By reconceptualizing the relationship between home and travel in his novels *Neuland* as well as *Homesick*, Nevo, according to Harris, belongs to the wave of authors who “seek to redefine Zionism and to

create a new inclusive Israeliness” by “comfortably exploring other cultures, and other places, while simultaneously re-exploring their homeland and notions of home” (3).

In “House, Interrupted,” Barbara Mann examines the treatment of the Palestinian narrative in Israeli literature and stresses that in *Homesick*, as in many other contemporary works of fiction, the story of Palestinian dispossession “is absorbed into Hebrew literature, thus becoming a part of the Israeli Jew’s moral journey” (6). Mann draws attention to the Palestinian perspective on the concept of “home,” which conjures up images of destruction and disrupted memories “informed by trauma and loss” (2).

■ Egyptian Modern Fiction and Alaa Al Aswany

The English-language body of scholarship on contemporary Egyptian fiction is limited but emerging and this research will contribute to its development. Interestingly enough, since both *Homesick* and *The Yacoubian Building* are read as allegorical representations of homelands, the wide scope of critical material that explores the aesthetics of “space” and “place” on contemporary Israeli fiction proves a useful resource for my analysis of the Egyptian novel.

Though of little interest to this project, the only existing scholarship on *The Yacoubian Building* is offered by Christiane Schlote in the context of postcolonial theory. Through *The Yacoubian Building*, Scholte exemplifies the bleak urban vision of cosmopolitan centers in novels written by Arab authors in the Middle East.

Chapter Outline

My thesis will consist of an introduction, two chapters and a conclusion. Following the introduction, the two chapters will discuss novels that introduce and tackle different aspects of the concepts “space”, “place” and “home.”

Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide theoretical backgrounds about the aesthetics of “space” in literature in order to introduce the relationship between character and “place” and the implications of their interaction within narrative structures. I will then outline the stages of the main argument and its division into subsequent chapters.

Chapter One: Eshkol Nevo’s *Homesick*

In *Homesick*, the reader is admitted into the homes of neighbors living in Maoz Ziyon, also known also as Castel, its former name before the Israeli War of Independence of 1948. One of the four houses is two stories high and is occupied by the Zakian family. While Moshe and Sima Zakian live on the first floor with their two children, Avram and Gina, Moshe’s parents, live on the second floor. Another home is occupied by the Avneris, Nehama, Rueven and Yotam, their ten-year-old boy; the Avneris have recently lost their eldest son Gidi in the Lebanon war. The third home is Amir and Noa’s, a young couple who decide to live together and rent a small apartment in the Zakians’ house. The fourth home is that of Saddiq, an old construction worker from the territories. Saddiq’s old Arab house, which was property of his family before 1948, is where Avram and Gina Zakian currently live. The proximity the characters live in allows for a flow of experiences, thoughts and emotions between the places in which they live and the characters themselves. This chapter will discuss the way in which Nevo’s use of techniques of familiarization and defamiliarization of the space the characters occupy makes them part and parcel of an

intricate process which the author terms “osmosis.” This chapter will also elucidate the functionality of the polyphonic narration in the novel and the contribution of this narrative device to the novel’s theme.

Chapter Two. Alaa Al Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building*

In *The Yacoubian Building*, Alaa Al Aswany uses an existing architectural structure in downtown Cairo to provide a microcosm of Egyptian society. The building houses characters of different social classes and religious backgrounds. Although the characters do not all come into direct contact with each other, their actions and interests infiltrate each other’s lives. This chapter will explore the ways in which both the building and its inhabitants are engaged in a reciprocal act of storytelling; I will also investigate the implications of this act and its utility to the allegorical reading of the novel. In this chapter, I will also examine Al Aswany’s use of spatial metaphors to comment on current state of affairs in Egypt and how he maximizes the effect of his commentary and critique by setting the novel in the 1990s, a period of political unrest.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I will summarize the ways in which the two novels use space as a complex entity interacting, shaping and defining human experience. I will discuss how, by carrying the reader beyond the superficial everyday life experience of “space,” the novels create a more profound perspective of this entity. I will review how “space,” character and narration can operate together to create a thematic unity, hoping in that to contribute to the existing discourse on the aesthetics of “space” in literature.

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