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The Space Beyond the Ocean

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## Introduction, Aims and Guidelines

This novel, comprising approximately 200 pages, of which 100-120 pages will be my creative writing thesis, will be written in a style of literary realism. It will take as its central action, the aftermath of a young family's emigration to Israel, a physical dislocation to what transpires to be a surprisingly foreign land. It is the story of an Anglo-American family torn apart by the violence of the changes it is experiencing but essentially held together and rehabilitated by the resilience of its own organic tissue.

The metaphor of tearing apart and then knitting together over a scar will be true not only for this family, but also for the 'yishuv'- (village or settlement), in which they live, as well as for Israel, the country containing them. The analogy is imperfect, and in line with this life-like imperfection, there are those in the story who become estranged. The Yishuv families and members reflect something of the inner life of the Blau family in the unexpected concentric circles of unease that we the readers discover within them, as well as the diverse ways in which they deal with their unease. At times a holistic view of the inner life of the Yishuv appears to stand in or be a microcosm for aspects of life in Israel, and yet the characters stand alone and are not stock characters or merely emblematic of one group or another.

The Yishuv of Har Gonen is situated in Jerusalem Corridor and within the Judean Hills. Frequently, action takes place as the characters travel back and forth across the 'Green Line'.

In their new environment, much of the existential difficulty of the cauldron which is Israel will be exposed to this young family. The Blaus begin to interact with their neighbours and in their daily dealings, the lid is blown on personal vulnerabilities in a way that they have not experienced before. The vulnerabilities of their neighbours are also exposed, although a great force of resilience also emerges as if in response to the friction and attrition that abounds in their environment.

The story also encompasses the idea of grafting together different species to create a new fruit. The host plant holds onto certain key characteristics while taking on different properties of the new plant, and on a human level, this may be a conscious act of self-cultivation. It is the story of all immigrants on a certain level, and yet it is a story which is also peculiarly “grown in Israel.” The experience of living and growing in Israel is sometimes a stultifyingly intense experience, like the rarefied speeded-up cultivation that occurs in a hothouse although often not quite as favourably primed to meet all the young plant’s needs. However, the adaptation and growth must be fast-forwarded in a similar manner to the hothouse, in order to match an environment which is simultaneously East and West, manically culturally diverse, a primitive war-torn frontier as well as a burgeoning high-tech hub of first world development. Sometimes this grafting process works, and sometimes Frankenstein-like it spawns results which are frightening.

#### Conceptual background

*The Space Beyond the Ocean* addresses just that, the distance between where you come from and where you are going to, the “brave new world” of your imaginings, that you conceive lies at your journey’s end. From one perspective, the distance separating one continent from another, an ocean, is an enormous cultural divide. In the modern age, the cultural divide is far greater than the physical journey. It is also about the psychological and spiritual reach that is demanded of the immigrants who are stretched individually and nationally in the course of this crossing.

Key themes include themes such as gestalt, (or wholeness), versus loss of identity or alienation. Gestalt is used here in the sense offered by Gestalt therapy where people are viewed as intrinsically permeable, and where environment and experience are pivotal in human formation. Intervention in this form of therapy is essentially humanistic in nature. Society is seen as

potentially alienating and isolating. The client is encouraged to form a responsible, engaged relationship with his environment, and to aid this, the environment that is created by the therapist is essentially self-affirming and actualizing. This could be described as part of the back-story or underpinning with which some of the stories are upholstered. Immigrants deal with overwhelming issues of isolation and alienation. However, it's not just immigrants who are involved. Alienation issues are experienced powerfully but not exclusively by the immigrants. Many forms of trauma and unprocessed psychic pain in different forms rear up in the novel which lead to questioning of identity, both individual and national, and this in its turn can lead to a turning away from society. What is the scaffolding that these sometimes damaged people are going to use to climb out of this isolation and engage more fully and integrally with their society? The very strong human drive to wellness, or Gestalt; is a powerful force or thematic concern in the novel.

### **Conceptual background**

In exploring issues of immigrant identity, I been influenced by previous works of immigrant literature. In Amy Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, a complicated mother-daughter relationship is taken apart to reveal layers of secrets and lies as well as intergenerational and cultural differences. The two main characters, Pearl and her mother possess terrible secrets. They tread water in the residue of their relationship taking pot-shots at each other, each one a feinting shadow of her real self. Ultimately both Pearl and her mother Winnie, are forced to tell their secrets.

Winnie reveals the true story of her life in China, which albeit one largely comprised of trauma, persecution and abuse, also lays open ironically the depths of her failure to belong and her

crisis of mixed identity in the United States. She is revealed as much more than the superstitious caricature of an aging Chinese matriarch, histrionic and attached to her good luck emblems. The tragic truth remains that with all the liberty the U.S offered Winnie, she remained pegged at a childish stage of development, a virtual caricature of herself since in the U.S, she was a foreigner with no real mode of making herself understood. Despite all the trauma and horror of her former life in China, it was only there that Winnie fully recognised her context or environment, and was therefore able to articulate far more of her true self in China than in the U.S. However, the ultimate irony for the immigrant is that one often ends up belonging nowhere, as the “China,” of their past and present differ so vastly from one another. For Winnie, (as for many fleeing migrants), it was also an inescapable reality that the place where she had a context, was also a place of horror.

Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* purports at first sight to be a jocular, tongue in cheek study of immigrants in a less than tolerant England. Smith conveys the muddy fashion in which the lives of immigrants mingle with those of English locals who target them with suspicion and slurs. It is mostly deeply unsatisfactory despite some profound bonds being forged. However deep pathos lurks beneath the dislocation which suffuses this surreal tale. This is vividly evident in the bitter monologue below expressed by Samad Iqbal:

“.....it feels to me like you make a devil’s pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport...you get stamped; you want to make a little money, .... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; -terrible food, dreadful newspapers- who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcome, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil’s pact...It drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere..... And then you begin

to give up the very idea of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long dirty lie....and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an accident. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?"<sup>1</sup>

The depth of his alienation appears to be bottomless. It is this very rootlessness and chaos that Smith portrays so vividly in *White Teeth*, informing as to the psychologically upended and fractured daily life of the immigrant, and which made this novel so relevant to me as part of the conceptual background. In *On Beauty*, Smith continues this portrayal of fractured realities of different cultures. She presents incongruent personalities at odds over sometimes seemingly meaningless differences best understood via their very personal frames of reference in her signature amusing style. She satirizes fracture, loss of identity, rootlessness, and despite the long tenure of some of her citizens, it is a cultural issue.

*Goodbye Columbus* by Philip Roth was a coming of age novel for American Jewry in the late 1950's. Interestingly it has not become dated in terms of many of the sociological concerns of the Jewish population which it laid wide open at the time. It is still relevant in terms of its straining upward mobility and self-consciousness. What has changed for the Jew in the U.S despite so many manifestations of success when identity is still so tenuous? Neil Klugman experiences a kinship and displays protectiveness toward the young Negro boy in the book who regularly visits the library to escape into another reality via vivid Gauguin reproductions. In this, Neil indicates that he and this young rough-talking boy, separated by a yawning cultural and educational chasm have

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<sup>1</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000), page 407.

a yearning and a sense of displacement in common. This sense of displacement will reoccur in his interaction with Brenda, his co-religionist. Neil and Brenda Patimkin enact their heady love affair across social and cultural divides which shouldn't really be a barrier at all but feel immense. In many ways, it forms a very helpful background for similar concerns in my novel. Neil the philosophy graduate, loving but rebelling against his unpretentious relatives like Aunt Gladys who make a fetish of feeding and Brenda, ex-Newark, and very nouveau riche throw open the dichotomy of what Jewish identity is about. This is interestingly, at a stage, when the nascent Israeli state was a mere blip on the general American political consciousness, and the book addresses the Israeli state so tangentially that it only crops up in questions such as does Neil's mother work for Hadassa or not?

*The Space Beyond the Oceans* is looking at a different kind of Jewish dream and its actualization, emerging from some of the same but also a very different context. *Goodbye Columbus* which offers a satirical comparison of the Jew in the American Diaspora, at a very different point in history was a fascinating backdrop for this.

Other novels that were helpful in terms of stylistic and formulaic versatility were *Larry's Party* by Carol Shields and *Olive Kitteredge* by Elizabeth Strout. I realized in the course of my writing that I was not going to follow a conventional story curve in the interest of doing justice to the story I wanted to write. I needed more story lines. I wanted to create a village or community but at the same time there was a dominant story line and protagonist. This had been done before in older more epic novels, (as in the Victorian multi-plot novels of Eliot and Dickens), but not as much to my knowledge in the modernist, more pared-down style that suited me. To this end it was remarkably encouraging to discover some successful examples of books that didn't fit perfectly into any common pattern. They were neither short stories nor novellas, nor did they follow a classic

novel trajectory. I was encouraged that books like *Olive Kitteredge* existed, books which told stories in their own unconventional form which were neither self-enclosed short stories nor compelled by a taut trajectory, focusing on the single climatic resolution of crisis.

As far as *Larry's Party* was concerned, Shields made it her fascinating concern to penetrate the consciousness of a 'generic male' indelibly altered by the extraordinary times in which he lived and the vast spectrum of change he would have to integrate via the women he loved. She believed that according to the superficiality of her time, men were viewed as buffoons by emancipated women but the angst of their adaptation or brave attempts, were hardly taken into account. The innovative patterning of the book takes its cue from Larry's obsession with mazes. Larry moves from significant maze to maze in the story but more importantly, he moves from one relationship to another where his sentient personality engages with the different woman of the time before some type of trauma usually carries off the relationship, to his mystification. He is a puzzle-builder but ironically appears to find himself utterly lost in the Byzantine complexity of womanhood that the times he lives in, force upon him. He himself comes from a highly charged family history of his own. Interestingly, we see Larry not only as a product of his time but of his family system. Throughout it all, Larry persists with his maze-building, advancing to mazes of ever greater innovation and complexity. Family systems and pathology as well as integrating social change are both features of my novel.

The denouement of the Shield's story happens in accordance with the title, at a party where unexpected twists occur, but satisfyingly Larry ultimately appears to negotiate his personal maze with some degree of success This book was satisfying for me as a reader, but also technically very interesting in terms of its innovation, and uniqueness.

Shape of the project

This novel will comprise approximately 15-20 chapters, and in its entirety will be of a predicted length of approximately 200 pages. It will take place over a time period of approximately two to three years, with the exception of a last chapter located further on in time.

The first few chapters introduce us to the major female protagonist, Fran, who is immediately in motion as the novel begins, trying to help out the worst “wounded” of her children, her oldest son Tzvi, seemingly profoundly displaced by their “Aliya.” What starts off as a relatively routine journey for the two of them, ostensibly a check-up visit at a Jerusalem orthopaedist, transpires to be a momentous experience. It propels them both into the dense common ground of trauma and violence, which is a part of life in Israel which they have previously not been exposed to. Tzvi and Fran are tangentially exposed to a terrorist attack from having met the intended victims immediately beforehand and being the first to come upon the dead body of one of them, straight after the attack. They must rapidly get away from an explosive situation, which appears unsecured and get help.

Thereafter as Fran, is attempting to assess and contain the damage to her son and continue the process of finding him the right school, her marriage begins to fall apart with a perplexing vengeance, although overt cracks had been there for a while. We meet Matt, her husband, who is plastering over his incipient collapse with a burgeoning substance abuse habit and a tendency to verbally abuse his wife. By end of this third of the novel, we will witness some of Matt’s destructive spiral in Israel, including futile efforts at gaining employment. He then decides to “temporarily” leave his family for work prospects in the U.S, and his wife who has refused to return, is faced with the task of attempting to turn around their Aliya experience as a single parent.

By the middle third of the novel, we meet another key figure. This is Suzanne, Fran’s neighbour on the Yishuv, whose own life and marriage will come under scrutiny. Robert,

Suzanne's husband as sharp edged as a precision tool, is acrid and cutting, and yet vulnerable and precarious on the power-dynamic that he straddles and strives to stay afloat on. We see him through his wife, indirectly facing off against his gay son Gil whose vulnerable personality and sexuality he refuses to acknowledge, as well as positively in relation to his kindred spirit daughter Talya and in relief, as a lovingly participative grandfather. He is set up in his sharp edges to highlight a society where skills of combat and hyper-vigilance come into daily use. In his abrasive world, the issue of where the battleground begins, and ends is not always clear. This mitigating factor along with his not unnuanced character, create at times an uncertain sympathy. He becomes part of the puzzle that the novel is laying out about machismo elements in society.

We meet Noam, a young, Israeli soldier and his parents. Rooted in Israeli soil already for a few generations, Noam becomes deracinated by virtue of violence and loss. It remains to be seen whether the land that has nourished him and the people who cradle him can restore him. We encounter Noam vis à vis the two older women, Fran and Suzanne, in their common art class, as well as interacting with his father with whom he is feeling out his way forward. We see him tentatively with his friends, his memories, and finally attempting to find his own way

We meet Grandma, Fran's mother in law, hopelessly mired in partisan feeling and witnessing the painful renegotiation of family relationships. Fran walks through a stark divorce process with a husband who apparently has lost any vestige of memory of shared lives. The children spend their first time together with their father back in Israel, post separation and divorce in the Hilton Hotel, along with the father's new female elect and the grandparents. The new reality is viewed starkly but insightfully through Tzvi's sixteen-year-old eyes.

In the last third of the novel in cameo settings, we encounter more of the separate lives which form part of the wider story of the novel. In one such chapter, we meet the Ben Gigi's. They

flesh out the larger than life social and cultural clashes and remoulding that is part of life in Israel. It is at once antagonistic as well as vivid, colourful and full of pungency.

Shir and Ronit, have their own vignette, part of the lonely, almost incidental, semi-lost figures that have attached themselves to the Yishuv, unconsciously seeking completion and hybridization in their new society. Shir in her youthful lostness which reaches the magnitude of profound mental illness, is another extreme like a couple of her “hilltop youth” friends who find socially sanctioned ways to disassociate from their alienated insecure existences. Like Fran and Suzanne before her they are reaching for a renewal and revitalization implicit in the promise of a new society, although reality takes a back seat in their journeys.

The last chapter will allow the reader a view from a differently angled lens, enabling a perspective of foreground and an intimation of future for the characters, showing how the arcs of their destinies have intertwined, It will be a climatic chapter, where there is resolution to some of the thematic binaries that have been teased apart. As well by this final chapter, the different interwoven strands of narrative will have merged and cohered into a community of voices that are both distinct and part of a collective. Narrative will be roving third person narrative, frequently mediated via the female characters Fran and Suzanne, as well as Tzvi Blau.

This device of a larger epic story embedded within numerous narratives or a primary narrative voice (or two), clustered within smaller stories is a challenging and unconventional type of structure, but it seems to best serve the story I would like to tell. It is intended that it will serve to structure the novel, and that the final climatic chapter will unify it into a cohesive whole.

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