

**Anna Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 205.**

by *Dario Miccoli*

*Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration and Israel/Palestine* by Anna Bernard is an original study on the representation and transmission of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as they emerge from literary texts that circulate in metropolitan arenas – by which the author primarily means the Anglo-American world, given its global relevance and the usage of English as a modern *lingua franca*. Bernard bases herself on studies on Israeli and Palestinian literary history and, most of all, on postcolonial and world literature. In doing so, she proposes a comparative and relational reading of texts by Israeli and Palestinian writers: from the memoirs of Edward Said and Mourid Barghouti to the postmodernist novels of Orly Castel-Bloom and those of the world-acclaimed author Amos Oz. The first chapter, “Reading for the nation”, discusses how the idea of national narration has been increasingly marginalized in the field of postcolonial literary studies, also because of scarce attention to a context such as Israel and Palestine. Focusing on this context would allow reappraising the centrality of the national narration and the circulation of its literary representations in metropolitan spaces. Bernard calls for a rethinking of the notion of national allegory – derived from Fredric Jameson’s influential scholarship – and elaborates upon the *demographic imaginary* as a crucial component of Israeli and Palestinian national narrations. This category helps her to “present a framework for thinking the ways in which narrative literature might serve as a laboratory for testing different ways of organizing and defining a polity” (p. 40).

“Exile and liberation: Edward Said’s *Out of Place*” is a thorough discussion of Said’s 1999 memoir. In the chapter, the author argues that this widely circulated text offers an interesting contextualization of the Palestinian demographic imaginary. Following a structure similar to that of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, Said problematizes the exile and liberation of himself as a member of the Palestinian collective and as an individual. Thanks to a close textual reading of *Out of Place*, Bernard demonstrates that Said develops “a model of Palestinian identity and belonging that is based on political belief rather than geographical or biological origin” (p. 66). Reading the memoir against the background of seminal studies by Franco Moretti and Frantz Fanon, the author explains that Said conceives *Out of Place* as an exilic exercise in both personal and national liberation and political awakening.

The third chapter, “‘Who Would Dare to Make It into an Abstraction:’ Mourid Barghouti’s *I Saw Ramallah*” is instead dedicated to the Palestinian poet and writer Mourid Barghouti. At its core is his memoir *I Saw Ramallah* (1997), that recounts not the childhood and youth of the author – as Said’s *Out of Place* did – but the first return trip to Palestine since 1967, after thirty years of absence. In contrast to Said’s exilic reading of Palestinian identity, Barghouti juxtaposes the experience of the Palestinians who live in the West Bank and those who are in exile. This permits him to build an innovative vision of the Palestinian collective as a set of fragments that highlights how – Bernard notes – the writer’s goal is “to acknowledge and explore the historical events and contemporary material realities that divide Palestinians from one another” (p. 87). By narrating the spatial and physical changes occurred to his village and family after the Six-Day War, Barghouti points to the need of establishing a viable solidarity among Palestinians living in different, yet interrelated, contexts.

“‘Israel is not South Africa’: Amos Oz’s Living Utopias” takes quite a critical stance vis-à-vis Oz and his literary and essayist production. In the chapter, Bernard reads Oz as the quintessential representative of the Israeli liberal and progressive left in metropolitan circles and particularly in the Anglo-American world. She analyses many of his works, from *My Michael* (1968) to *A Perfect Peace* (1982) and *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2002), arguing that they all map conflicts between individuals and the political rifts of Israeli society. Bernard also contends that Oz’s fiction explicitly excludes Palestinians in order to defend “the Zionist ‘living utopia’” (p. 114).

Two women writers, one Israeli and the other Palestinian, are at the centre of Chapter Five. “Intersectional Allegories: Orly Castel-Bloom and Sahar Khalifeh” reads texts by Castel-Bloom and Khalifeh as “trenchant critiques of the gender-nationalist nexus in Israeli and Palestinian society” (p. 16). While acknowledging the different poetics of the two – postmodernist and satirical in the case of Castel-Bloom, realist and historical in that of Khalifeh – Bernard interestingly explains that in both cases the nation, and intersectionality as a literary strategy, are a central form of narrative thanks to which discussing issues related to the marginalized position of women. Considering the world literary approach that Bernard follows in *Rhetorics of Belonging*, it is however not entirely clear how can someone like Castel-Bloom – and, to a lesser degree, Khalifeh – be viewed as a *world writer*, considering the limited circulation of her texts and the fact that only three of them, *Dolly City* (1992), *Human Parts* (2002) and *Textile* (2006), are translated into English.

The sixth chapter, “‘An Act of Defiance Against Them All’: Anton Shammas’ *Arabesques*” is probably the most convincing one. The author introduces the

Palestinian Israeli writer and scholar Shamma, who in 1988 published his only yet much-celebrated and discussed novel *Arabesques*. Written in Hebrew and preceded by harsh discussions on the meanings of Israeli identity between Shamma and Abraham B. Yehoshua, *Arabesques* portrays an imaginary Palestinian – constructed by Shamma in a semi-autobiographical manner – that recalls the history of his village and his present life as a writer. According to Bernard, that of Shamma is the only text among those analyzed to suggest a truly post-Zionist idea of the nation that includes all the inhabitants of the region and which resembles what in political circles is known as *one-state solution*. Only *Arabesques* “seeks to imagine a different kind of Israeli/Palestinian polity” and paradoxically becomes “a nationalist novel though the nation it champions does not yet exist” (p. 159).

As mentioned at the beginning, *Rhetorics of Belonging* inscribes itself within a field of research that, in the last two decades, utilised postcolonial approaches in order to analyse in novel ways Israeli and Palestinian literature: think especially of works by Hannan Hever, Ammiel Alcalay, Gil Z. Hochberg and Lital Levy. Bernard combines this line of inquiry with, on the one hand, a world literary interpretation that is indebted to the scholarship of David Damrosch and particularly of Fredric Jameson and, on the other, with the idea of Zionism as a form of settler colonialism. With reference to this last point, I must admit that this reading of Zionism – and, even more so, of Israeli and Palestinian literature as the by-product of a settler-colonial reality – does not seem entirely convincing. Furthermore, whereas it is true that the relational reading of Israeli and Palestinian literature is a welcome and salutary approach, I am less inclined to believe that this necessarily implies telling “the region’s history [...] as a story of ‘settler-native relation’” (p. 12).

Surely, Zionism borrowed practices and strategies that are (also) related to those of modern European colonialism. But it should be contextualized in a longer and more nuanced past, in which both real and imaginative ties between the Land of Israel and the Jewish People always existed. The problematization of following a settler-colonial interpretation comes out very evidently if one thinks of the Sephardic and *mizrahi* writers. Bernard justifies their absence in the book by the fact that none of them sufficiently circulates in metropolitan literary arenas or does so by virtually erasing their ethnicity, as in the case of Castel-Bloom. But then, does someone like Castel-Bloom have that “high degree of visibility in English” (p. 6), which Bernard attributes her, as opposed to authors that more explicitly deal with *mizrahi* issues like Shimon Ballas or Ronit Matalon – whose number of translated novels is more or less the same of Castel-Bloom? My

impression is that the inclusion of *mizrahi* authors – among other issues – would have revealed how the literary relations between Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians are often more complex than the settler-colonial framework presupposes.

With this, I do not intend to minimize the relevance of Bernard's volume, which is indeed an important contribution to the field of postcolonial literature and Israel/Palestine Studies. Mine is however an invitation to handle more cautiously theoretical frameworks and categories – such as *settler-colonialism* or the notion of *demographic imaginary* – that risk imposing very specific interpretations on literary texts that should perhaps be allowed to speak more for themselves.

*Dario Miccoli, Ca' Foscari University Venice*

**How to quote this article:**

Dario Miccoli, Review of *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine*, by Anna Bernard in *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, n.10 December 2016

*url:* [www.quest-cdecjournal.it/reviews.php?id=106](http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/reviews.php?id=106)