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**‘Between The Independence and The Nakba’- Analyzing the critique of
(national) identities in psychoanalysis and modern literary writing.**

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Abstract

At the time of writing this paper, the Israel-Palestine war is still raging. Despite a prior agreed upon ceasefire, the Israeli Defense Force has continued its genocidal campaign in Gaza, the West Bank, and other occupied territories of Palestine (Al Jazeera, 2025). Almost a century prior to this war however, the father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud penned down one of his most crucial works, *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939). In the book, Freud problematizes the origins of a pure Jewish identity by placing violence and fratricide at its origin. The book however, also highlights his own struggles with his Jewish identity, and his anxiety of psychoanalysis being perceived as a 'Jewish science'. *Moses and Monotheism* hence serves as a study of the formation of a people, with a unique 'national' identity.

The question of national identity however, is not exclusive to the purview of psychoanalytic discourse, and has also been poignantly discussed in literature especially originating in the midst of the Israel-Palestine war over the years. The following essay analyses the critique of national identities from both of these distinct, yet interrelated perspectives. The essay also discusses the potential of poetry as resistance literature and the role of literature in psychosocial studies as a critique of the 'master discourse'.

'If Moses were an Egyptian...'

At the heart of *Moses and Monotheism* Freud introduces a radical notion. He argues that it is the 'outsider', in the form of an Egyptian Moses, that is constitutive of Jewishness as a national identity (Freud, 1939). While the particular claim of an Egyptian moses has been contested among other commentaries¹, the implications of such a belief being *thought* to be true are of particular interest to us. In the book, Freud argues that the figure of Moses was indeed an Egyptian who rescued the semites (whom he terms as a bunch of 'immigrant foreigners') and was in turn murdered, for enforcing an oppressive form of monotheism, upon them. By making such an assertion, Freud problematizes the origins of Jewish history in more than one way. Firstly, if we are to accept Moses

¹ See Carroll (1987) for a discussion on the same in "*Moses and Monotheism*" Revisited—Freud's "Personal Myth"?

to be an Egyptian, we shall reach the conclusion that Jews as a people, were founded by a 'stranger'. The stranger who was then murdered by the same tribe of immigrants who later reproached their deeds.

Secondly, we must focus on both the murder of the Egyptian Moses, and the adoption of the religion of Jahve by the following Jewish traditions. Hence, contrary to the claim of being the 'chosen people' of God, the origin of such people does not seem to reside in a singular glorious moment of divinity, but rather in a more complex *duality*. Freud further focuses on this duality by introducing two libidinal ties to the discussion of national identity. The murder of the first Moses serves for Freud as a reenactment of the killing of the primal father in his 'just-so' story of the primal horde in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 2001, Originally published 1913). The act both defines the collective identity of those who carried it out, while simultaneously establishing the victim as a leadership figure. The Egyptian Moses who did 'lead' the Jewish immigrants out of Egypt with aspirations of forming a new people, resembled the primal father. As observed throughout the book; in making this relation, Freud showcases the vulnerability of his own Jewish identity.

The deconstruction of the two Moses as leaders, is crucial in understanding Freud's critique of national identities. He observes that the Egyptian Moses was said to be 'slow of speech' (Freud, 1939, p. 53). While he uses this attribute to further support his hypothesis of Moses being an Egyptian (and hence non-familiar to the language of his tribe), such a trait also portrays the Egyptian Moses as more 'ordinary' than divine. Again, the claim of Jews being the superior, chosen people has to be negotiated for a simpler identity, i.e. that of the immigrant foreigners. Therefore, the two libidinal ties that Freud introduces to the discussion of Moses and his tribe is the role of the leader, along with the collective identification of the members of the tribe to its said leader. As discussed above, we may entertain the possibility that the Egyptian Moses had a form of 'limp' in his speech, suggesting hesitation and doubt. This deliberate effort to not entertain the claim of a single divine Jewish origin is further significant when we conceive of a religion that chooses its subjects as being the 'chosen people' may indeed be much more appealing than one that accepts its origins in violence, grief and collective reproach.

Such collective trauma of the primeval murder of 'the other' is constitutive of the contemporary Jewish identity for Freud. According to him, the imposition of the stringent, oppressive,

monotheistic tradition, which led to the killing of Moses, *returns* in the later traditions to constitute an identity that embodies the transgenerational guilt of collective violence that lies at its origins, which he terms as a cultural ‘return of the repressed’² (Freud, 1939, p. 197). The question of transgenerational guilt however, is also addressed through literary writings in the post-Freudian landscape of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and will be discussed extensively in the following sections of this essay. It should however be noted that Freud had placed the need for problematizing the origins of Jewishness above ‘nationalist’ ideals, and at moments was also critical of Jewish immigration to Palestine (Roudinesco, 2004).

These moments in the Freudian body of work are also symbolic of the time in which *Moses and Monotheism* was written. The use of the word Freudian ‘body’ is deliberate here. As highlighted by the Palestinian literary critic Edward Said, the frailty of Freud’s age, and that of his convictions embodies *Moses and Monotheism* as his last major work (Said et al., 2003). Similarly, the claims of a single glorious origin that were being propagated by the Nazi ideology in Europe were also a source of anxiety for Freud. Could we then assume that through revisiting Moses, Freud attempts to introduce a leader antithetical to the ‘pure’ Aryan Adolf Hitler? In Nazi ideology, the lack of acceptance, and deep hatred for ‘the other’ stood opposite to Freudian re-conception of Jewish origins, that presents Moses as a composite of ‘the other’ in the forms of an Egyptian and later a Midianite (Freud, 1939, p. 55). While such a crude comparison may risk becoming a case of wild analysis, Said encourages a contrapuntal reading of Freud’s dilemmas, and asserts that the book was both deeply personal, and profoundly political for him. Hence, the duality of Freud’s own Jewish subjectivity, serves as another tool for the interpretation of this work. His identity as a ‘godless’ Jew, and his apprehensions of the religious ‘oceanic’ feeling in the past (Freud, 1930) are therefore crucial in understanding psychoanalysis as a ‘Jewish science’.

In his *Monologue with Freud*, Yosef Yerushalmi confronts Freud posthumously as wanting to propagate his ‘psychological Jewishness’ through psychoanalysis, while deliberately ignoring his Judaism (Yerushalmi, 1991). He also cites the instances from Freud’s own life when Freud chooses to be estranged from his Judaism, while utilizing his Jewishness. Yerushalmi saw psychoanalysis

² While Freud’s work on ‘return of the repressed’ began with the analysis of the impact that soldiers from World War I experienced on their return from the battlefield, Freud redraws upon the concept in the form of a transgenerational return of the repressed violence in Judaism’s origin. See also Rebecca West’s *The Return of the soldier* (1918) for a literary exploration of Freud’s initial thoughts on the same.

as a discipline that could be of immense significance for the Jewish identity in relation to the antisemitism that was ever-present. However, Yerushalmi wrote his critique at a time where Jewish national identity had completely transformed from ‘people without land’ (Shapira, 1999) to people with *occupied* land. The Zionist movement for the formation of Israel as a nation-state was chiefly formed through the works of Theodor Herzl, and is characteristic of the single glorious identity that Freud was so cautious of. In the following sections, we shall examine the critique of such a rigid, superior, ‘chosen’ national identity using literature and poetry that share Freud’s critique.

The Nakba of the Independence

In his seminal work, *Khirbet Khizeh* (1939) Israeli writer and politician, S. Yizar documents the occupation of a Palestinian village³ by the soldiers of the Israeli Defense Force⁴. The novella stands as a documentation of the atrocities that were carried out against the innocent Arab civilians with the primary goal of territorial occupation, which drove large swathes of the native population into exile. The significance of the work is even greater if one takes into consideration that Yizar himself served as a member of the Israeli Government at the time, and published *Khirbet Khizeh* in 1949, immediately following the Nakba. Therefore, the first line of the novel itself is quite intriguing. Yizar, in the form of his unnamed protagonist, explains how while it had indeed been a long time since the events of the novel took place, he could not bear to keep it to himself, and even praises his own patience and wisdom. However, as the book was being written almost simultaneously to the war, the temporality of his subjectivity becomes even more significant. Throughout the book, one can observe a deteriorating conviction in his nationalist identity, and it is violence, that serves as the catalyst of such deterioration. The reason for identifying this as a deterioration of his conviction, rather than an outright suspension of it, is because despite his desire for examining his violence, our protagonist perseveres with his actions. The cohort that accompanies Yizar’s protagonist, also play a major role in ensuring that the protagonist’s reflections do not steer them away from their nationalist agenda of occupying the land that was

³ While the village of Khirbet Khizeh is itself fictional, it stands as a metaphor for the numerous villages occupied by the IDF during the Nakba.

⁴ Henceforth referred to as the IDF.

‘rightfully’ theirs. The intent of territorial occupation therefore, separates the identity of these Israeli soldiers from the Arab ‘other’ that lies outside of them.

If we are to revisit the Freudian idea of the Jewish identity as being constitutive of the other, such exclusion is certainly more characteristic of the ‘chosen people’ that do not believe in an Egyptian origin. Similarly, the exclusion of the other is necessitated by the nationalist identity that every soldier of the IDF must embody. The other soldiers in the group therefore, are not only re-occupying the promised land, but in doing so, also seem to be re-constituting a national identity that does not require the ‘other’ at the heart of it. If the other members of the group are to share our protagonist’s apprehensions and refuse to occupy the village, it would only be possible to do so by forming an identification with the Arab exiles, resulting in deterrence of the fulfilment of nationalist goals. Placing the ‘other’ at the center of a people’s identity, like Freud does with Moses, results in a complete dismantling of the notion of a private superior origin. Therefore, the soldiers embracing their national identity need not only recognize the other as a separate entity, but also acknowledge their own potential for violence as a resource for the achievement of the national identity in question. The soldiers, whose national identity originates from the recent memories of the holocaust, and the past antisemitism in the Arab world, appear to see the occupation as retribution for the injustices they faced as a people. As argued by Freud therefore, the violence that lies at the origin of the Jewish history, returns to the very people who had repressed it.

It is not only the violence that appears to have returned however. The guilt and reproach of violence too can be witnessed in Yizar’s story at certain pivotal junctures. One such moment is when the group’s actions begin to weigh heavy on their hearts on seeing the “blind, lame, old and stumbling people” that reminds our protagonist of a similar scene in the Bible (Yizhar, 1939, p. 45). The helpless, passive identity of the villagers, accompanied by their occasional weeping, counteracts the projection of an enemy that warrants violence, hence deepening the sense of guilt among the soldiers who desire it. The lack of triumph present in the course of the formation of a new national Israeli identity therefore, results in frustration among the group. As the book progresses, the protagonist cannot help but identify himself with the ‘other’ Arab villagers, who are being driven into exile, courtesy of his actions. In a profound and painful moment of clarity, our protagonist reflects, “Wait. Two thousand years of exile. The whole story. Jews being killed. Europe. We were

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the masters now” (1939, p. 62). This desire of one national subject to exercise mastery over another, institutes further rejection of the ‘other’ as an object. It does not however, limit itself to rejection, but desires to dismantle, or assimilate the unique identity of the other into itself.

Similar to the cannibalistic consumption of the primeval leader that Freud referred to (2001/1913), a metaphoric consumption of the stranger outside, is achieved through such assimilation. Therefore, the exile of the villagers of *Khirbet Khizeh* is not only a separation from the native land for them, but also a splitting of the Arab-Palestinian identity. The constant reminders that Yizar therefore incorporates into the story of everything that the villagers were being forced to leave behind, from the camels to the furniture, make the national identity of the Palestinian villagers an uncertain subjectivity. A similar doubt in the Palestinian subjectivity can be witnessed from the protagonist in Ghassan Kanafani’s classic, *Return to Haifa* (Kanafani, 2000 Originally published 1969). The story documents the torments of a Palestinian couple who had to flee the city of Haifa following the Israeli occupation, and make a decision to return to the city two decades later, in search of the son they had to leave behind. Kanafani’s protagonist Said S. is deeply cynical of the Israeli authorities who opened the Mandelbaum gate, making the return possible. When his wife Safiya exclaims the impossibility of getting to ‘see’ Haifa again, Said corrects her by saying, “You’re not seeing it. They’re showing it to you” (p. 151).

The Israeli occupation therefore, deals a permanent blow to the Palestinian national identity. Such an identity, becomes contingent upon the permission of the Israeli ‘other’, similar to a master who is *allowing* his serf to see the land, but not experience it. The granting of such permission to travel is in equal parts humiliating, and powerful for Said. Unlike the Israeli national identity therefore, the Freudian idea of the return of the repressed is not sufficient in understanding the Palestinian one. Along with the return *of* the repressed, Said S. makes a return *to* the repressed in choosing to go back to Haifa. Such a return to the repressed becomes even more tormenting for Said and Safiya when they realize that their son Khaldun, was now part of the Israeli army. While departing, Said explains to Khaldun’s adopted mother Miriam⁵, how he had paid a price with his son, and how other Palestinians would have to pay a similar price. The ‘price’ that Said speaks of, appears to be

⁵ In Kanafani’s story, the character of Miriam is a Polish Jew, who settles in Said and Safiya’s home following the 1948 war, and adopts Khaldun, raising him to be Jewish, despite knowing him to be an Arab child.

that of a Palestinian national identity that existed before the Nakba. For Said, like the villagers of *Khirbet Khizeh*, it was not only the Palestinian territory, but the Palestinian psyche that now contained an Israeli demarcation following the Nakba. Stories like Yizar and Kanafani's also portray the imperialist undertones of the Israeli quest for independence. Such a quest again involves a doubling of the Jewish national identity, forcing one to hold the realities of Nakba, alongside the origin of its independence.

However, such literature also serves as a characteristic tool for understanding the Palestinian national identity, without attempting to resolve the complexities of such an identity. The same however, cannot be said of psychoanalysis. The desire for an interpretation of literature in psychoanalysis is chiefly driven by the desire to *know*. Moreover, such an interpretation risks exercising mastery over the text, as observed by Shoshana Felman (1977) in her analysis of the gothic horror classic *The turn of the screw* (James, 1991/1898). Works such as those of Kanafani are characteristic of what Deleuze and Guattari identify as 'minor literature' characterized by deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 18). The following section compliments our understanding of minor literature by drawing upon poetry as resistance, especially in reclaiming one's national identity.

Poetry as resistance

In her book *Resistance Literature* Barbara Harlow (1987) examines the use of poetry from across the globe as a form of resistance by those who consider it a part of their identity. In her analysis of the literature originating from Palestine during the Nakba and beyond it, Harlow examines the works of Palestinian poets such as Mahmoud Darwish in detail. Darwish's poem 'Identity Card' (Darwish, 1964) stands as a defining piece of the Palestinian ideal of *Sumud*⁶ (steadfastness or perseverance). In the poem, Darwish repeatedly asserts his identity as an Arab citizen, as opposed

⁶ Darwish's other works such as, 'I will slog over this road', 'I belong there' and 'The everlasting Indian Fig' further represent the spirit of *Sumud* in the form of poetry.

to an Israeli subject. The features he describes of his personhood are not limited to the physical, but to the environmental, the territorial, and even the metaphysical. His declaration of having roots older than the birth of time, illuminate the temporality of his identity, like Yizar before him. The political implications of such a claim are also significant. Darwish explains to the ‘authorities’ that are demanding his identity card that he is not a trespasser, but that rather they are the ones who usurped his homeland. The variety of reasons that Darwish outlines to prove his native identity also examines the non-believing nature of the Israeli authorities and the intolerance and hatred of the non-Jew, as Darwish experiences it.

Therefore, as Edward Said asserts, Freud’s reminders of the founder of Judaism being a non-Jew (Said et al., 2003, p. 44) elicit an angry political response. Because to place the ‘other’ at one’s core would result in an implosion of the national identity. To accept an Arab Identity card therefore, is to simultaneously tear down the border wall, which demands the identification of a ‘foreigner’. As mentioned prior however, the poem is not merely the reflection of the Israeli identity that territorializes, but also a Palestinian one that refuses to abandon the homeland. The decision to show an Arab Id card, knowing that it may result in violence, is to make poetry a space of resistance. Darwish too, like Freud before, was anxious of the impact that nationalist ideals may have on a people, and valued human dignity and freedom, over nationalism or statehood. Similarly, he too viewed identity to be much more ambiguous, and that which culminated around the ‘other’. In his poem ‘A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips’⁷, Darwish engages in conversation with an Israeli Soldier, whose disillusionment with the war, and dream of peace result in his eventual departure from the battlefield in search of ‘white tulips’ (Darwish, 2003, p. 165). The first few lines of the poem focus on how the soldier does not look to ‘intellectualize’ his dreams, but rather enjoys its affective qualities. This serves as a critique of psychoanalytic interpretation itself, which in trying to ‘interpret’ literature, may end up sidelining its aesthetic qualities.

The soldier further explains to Darwish how despite being ‘told’ to fight for his love for the land, he never experienced such love. Similarly, to be a soldier with love for his land, was to propagate violence without showing guilt or remorse. Like Yizar’s soldier occupying the Palestinian village, Darwish’s soldier too realizes the futility of occupying the land which, in turn refuses to

⁷ The heading, in some English translations has been identified as ‘White Lilies’, and as White Tulips among others.

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‘recognize’ him (Yizhar, 1939). Moreover, the soldier explains to Darwish how his actions have led to a crisis of his identity. The poem suggests that the soldier, driven by his nationalist ideals in getting rid of the other, begins to realize that ‘a single fascist moment of triumph’ does not make him the Israeli he thought he would be. This single fascist moment is much akin to the ‘single glorious origin’ that Freud cautions against adopting as a nationalist identity. The resultant guilt and remorse that both Yizhar and Darwish’s soldiers face reasserts the impossibility of an identity that completely disregards the ‘other’.

Conversely, to dream of the doves of peace flying into the ministry of war, along with the comfort of his mother’s coffee, is what appeals to Darwish’s soldier as closer to his idea of a ‘homeland’. The subjectivity of the ‘other’ also forms the core of the poetry that the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai produces, to use it as a source of identity in times of excruciating violence and uncertainty. His poem ‘Mayor’ shares the futility of building a ‘pure’ identity, and the amount of effort one needs to possess, in order to uphold such an identity. The ‘Mayor’ of Jerusalem, narrates his misery of overlooking the development of such a contentious piece of Earth. The job which entails to ‘build and build and build’ (Amichai, 1986, p. 35) also implies that, that which is built, comes crumbling down. It is not only the city itself however, as the mayor explains, but the anxiety of being surrounded by the ‘stones of the mountain’ that come crawling down at night. The poem suggests the return of those residing in the mountain, i.e. the natives, to reclaim their homeland, hence making the politician filled with dread. Those who have been exiled, in turn face both epistemic, and material violence.

Another one of Amichai’s poems, ‘The Diameter of the Bomb’ (1986, p. 118) encapsulates the discrepancy of the source, and the impact of violence. Amichai invites the readers to think about the actual impact that a bomb may have. ‘What is the bomb itself?’, one is forced to ponder. Is it the metal that surrounds it? The explosives deep in its womb? Or the ‘other’ at its target? Would it be possible to manufacture weapons, without keeping in one’s imagination the victims of it? A psychoanalytic answer to these questions would focus on both the material, and the unconscious. But in doing so, it may fail to fully appreciate the literary. On encountering the poem, the first complexity one confronts is in understanding who is the object of the poem. Is it an Israeli man witnessing violence against the Palestinian? Or vis-a-versa. Similarly, one may wonder if the object of the poem is a European, witnessing the violence among both these groups, and being

remorseful in knowing that he too, is encircled within the 'diameter of the bomb'. Therefore, the national identity one possesses, becomes contingent upon one's capacity of perpetrating violence, and resisting it.

The challenges of a feminine Palestinian identity are even more difficult to ascertain. Israel Poet Dahlia Ravikovitch encounters the duality of such violence upon not only the one who is a victim of it, but the one who witnesses it. In 'Hovering at a low Altitude' Ravikovitch (2011) witnesses, and narrates the abuse and murder of a Palestinian girl child. The tone of the narrator is that of a subject who is split on witnessing an atrocity which forces her to form an identification both with the man who possibly shares her national identity as an Israeli, and the girl, who shares her identity as a woman. Hence the constant reminders of her 'not being here' serve as an impunity from identifying with the victim, and in helping to hold on to a national identity. The poem thus, serves as an example of what Jessica Benjamin calls the 'doer and done-to' framework which further contests the claim of an identity for the 'self' that is separate from the 'other' (Benjamin, 2018).

Contemporary feminist literature from Palestine such as Adania Shibli's *A Minor Detail* (2020) further contribute to such an understanding by documenting numerous atrocities that the Israeli soldiers have carried out against Palestinian women over the years, in the form of resistance literature. These books and poems serve as a constant reminder of the perseverance that Palestinians have shown despite the overwhelming efforts for their decimation as a people by the modern Zionist movement. The *Sumud* of Palestinians continue to survive the 'divinity' of modern Zionist identity and despite its best efforts, the latter cannot continue to coexist, in the presence of the former.

Conclusion

The above essay examined the complexities and relevant critiques of national identities drawing upon psychoanalytic and literary discourses in the context of the Israel-Palestine war. Following such an examination, it would be fair to conclude that both Freud, in his critique of 'pure' Jewish origins, and the plethora of writers and poets following him, wanted to problematize the certainty and rigidity of national identity by highlighting the significance of the 'other' in comprising of

one's own self. The essay also addressed the desire of psychoanalysis to become a master discourse and encapsulate literary interpretation within its praxis, and how literature may in fact present the complexities of identity much more poignantly. Lastly, the essay discussed the possibilities of using poetry as resistance and how in doing so, one may reaffirm the Palestinian ideal of *Sumud*. Like the two Moses therefore, one must learn to hold both the psychoanalytic, as well as the literary critique of national identities together. The attempt to separate either, would result in disintegration, much similar to the national identity of Yizar's or Darwish's soldier.

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