

Belonging in Israel/Palestine: Theory and Literature

ANNA BERNARD, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2013), pp. 256, cloth, \$99.95.

In *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine*, Anna Bernard explores how Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian authors imagine their respective national collectives and how they articulate the terms of participation in these collectives. Reading key prose texts of Israeli and Palestinian authors, both fiction and nonfiction, she comments not only on the cultural and intellectual life of Israel/Palestine but also on its place within Anglo-American academia as well as on the theoretical paradigms that frame its scholarly treatment. Lucid, nuanced, and theoretically sophisticated, Bernard's book is one of the very best with which I am familiar on literature and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and should become standard reading for all those interested in the region, its politics, and its culture.

As suggested, *Rhetorics of Belonging* is as much a study of the literature of Israel/Palestine as an intervention in the current state of postcolonial studies. In fact, it is a plea for that literature's centrality to the field. As such, it is one of the most serious and sustained endeavors to think theory in relation to the literature of Israel/Palestine. As Bernard points out, notwithstanding the centrality of the "Question of Palestine" to the political (and moral) mission of postcolonial studies, postcolonial scholars all but ignore the cultural production of the region.

The question of theory is double. Current scholarship on Israel/Palestine is indeed often informed by theoretical discussions, mainly postcolonial studies, deconstruction, and feminism, but by and large it simply applies such theoretical concepts to the texts it examines and eschews the more difficult task of interrogating these in light of the particularity of the historical and geographic circumstances in Israel/Palestine. Simultaneously and similarly, postcolonial scholars tend to refrain from asking how the paradigms of the field are challenged by histories and geographies that lie beyond the pale of anglophone, francophone, and to a lesser extent hispanophone cultures. Bernard's interrogation of the theoretical terms of the postcolonial in the context of Israel/Palestine thus provides not only a timely and much-needed reevaluation of the scholarship of Israel/Palestine but also a case study in the way those histories and geographies that lie at the margins of the Anglo-American theoretical purview test its premises.

Bernard suggests that the lack of interest in Israel/Palestine on the part of postcolonial studies is linked to the untimeliness of the political and theoretical framework that seems most suitable to the study of that region. Both the production and the reception, whether local or metropolitan, of Israeli and Palestinian literatures underscore the centrality of the question of the nation to these literatures. Yet from the mid-1990s on—after the heyday of "nation and narration"—postcolonial interest in that question dissipated, dismissing the investment of local literati in national narration as a belated attachment to a notion already proved illusory. Underscoring, on the contrary, the importance of national narration to one's understanding of current social, cultural, and political formations in Israel/Palestine, Bernard retrieves Fredric Jameson's "national allegory," even as she rejects the simplistic narrative model one tends to associate with that term. Her project in this book is to show in what

ways one has to complicate Jameson's allegory to address the divergence of literary and political positions in Israel/Palestine. In this context, it should be noted that in the scholarship on Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian literature, the notion of the nation never lost its allure. Bernard's project could thus be rendered as inflecting postcolonial studies with current critical discussion in Hebrew and Palestinian literature.

Reading closely narrative prose by Edward Said, Mourid Barghouti, Amos Oz, Orly Castel-Bloom, Sahar Khalifeh, and Anton Shammas, Bernard explores how their texts struggle with the allegorical demand, with the demand, that is, to assert the correspondence of the individual consciousness of their protagonists and national collective consciousness. It should be noted here that she makes no distinction between fiction and nonfiction, underscoring instead the continuity between theoretical, political, and literary articulations. More important than the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is the biographical form of these texts, a form central, so Bernard argues, to their respective narration of national collectives. These texts, she suggests, subvert the demand to allegorize the narrative, even while they cannot but respond to its power and reassert it. The divergent strategies these texts employ to resist the allegorical demand yield divergent visions of polity and citizenship, of collectives and their terms of belonging.

On the face of it, Said's *Out of Place* is the paradigmatic text for a study such as Bernard's. Said's centrality both to postcolonial studies and to the advocacy of the Palestinians in the Anglo-American academy and public sphere allows Bernard to trace in greater detail the uneasy relationship between postcolonial studies and the question of Israel/Palestine. The inadequacy of key postcolonial terms to Said's autobiography is all the more manifest given Said's centrality to the field. In privileging individual experience over the collective one and in focusing on the effects of the collective on the individual, *Out of Place* seems to defy the allegorical demand that the individual consciousness reflect collective concerns. Yet, she notes, one cannot but read *Out of Place* as suggesting the collective experience that Said acknowledges is not his own and from which he distances himself. His privileged exile both echoes the collective Palestinian experience and is contrasted to it. The ambiguity that *Out of Place* features suggests that we should read national allegory not as a simple continuity between Said the individual and the Palestinian collective but, rather, as a discontinuous correspondence. Indeed, Bernard notes, Said's affiliation with the Palestinian cause was a matter of political will rather than of the necessity of origin, be it biological or geographic.

Bernard reads Barghouti's memoir, *I Saw Ramallah*, as a critique of Said's celebration of his personal exile. The author's materialist aesthetic emphasizes concrete, everyday Palestinian experience, underscoring sense perception over *idée reçue*. The tendency to abstract that material experience and reify it obfuscates—so Barghouti argues, pace Bernard—the Palestinian experience and betrays it. Yet such concrete experience also marks the disparity between the Palestinian diasporic intellectual and the experience of life in Palestine. For Barghouti, Bernard notes, the nation is not an imagined community but, rather, is produced continuously through material activity. Barghouti's narrative thus explores the realities that divide Palestinians in their material experience from one another—a narrative that nevertheless takes upon itself to relate these divergent experiences together.

Not surprisingly, Bernard is least sympathetic toward Amos Oz. As many have argued before her, notwithstanding the appearance of dissent, Oz's political writing and fiction are in line with mainstream Zionism. Bernard traces, however, the success of Oz's Zionist apology to his narrative strategy rather than to any explicit political proclamation. Indeed,

his protagonists endeavor to distinguish themselves from their communities, yet notwithstanding their principled objection to the demands of the collective, they all end up embracing these, even if halfheartedly. The author leads his readers—Bernard writes—to empathize with his imperfect, fallible individual characters and, ultimately, also with their modest hopes and dreams, chief among which is a vision of a Jewish state that excludes the Palestinian presence.

Bernard's discussion of Oz also puts into relief the hostility that generally characterizes postcolonial readings of Israeli-Jewish literature. I underscore this point precisely because I share her appraisal of Oz, his fiction and his politics, and her illuminating reading of Oz's fiction. And yet I think something is lost in such a reading. One can start pondering this matter with Bernard's assertion that Oz's commitment to Zionism as settler colonialism is known all too well; what we should explore, though, is the strategies through which such a commitment is articulated. I would question, however, whether rhetoric—a term that appears in the title of the book but, as far as I can tell, not once in the text—is indeed as insignificant to the political gist of a given text as Bernard argues.

Such an assertion, moreover, reveals that whereas *Rhetorics of Belonging* willingly questions the theoretical *doxa* of postcolonial studies, it leaves untouched the political *doxa* of the discipline. Most conspicuous in this regard is the exclusive characterization of Zionism as settler colonialism. When this argument was first introduced in the late 1960s and through its development over the next two decades, it carried with it great explanatory (as well as oppositional-political) power that productively reoriented our understanding of Israeli history and practices. However, more recently, the deployment of the term in certain circles has stifled a more nuanced discussion of Zionist history and politics. Here I shall note just one aspect that appears to me central to the reading of Israeli literary texts: that Zionism is also (and at the time, for Jews under persecution, mainly) political liberation theology. Whereas a number of scholars have studied Zionism extensively as political theology, they have focused exclusively on identifying theological moments and neglected to consider the particular content of such moments and their significance. The point is not merely that as liberation theology Zionism is uncomfortably akin to Palestinian nationalism; the common tendency to contrast them—which *Rhetorics of Belonging* shares—obfuscates the extent to which each national formation is framed and implicated by the other. The point is also that in failing to attend to the divergence (and internal contradictions) of Zionism, scholars fail to account for the full spectrum of its rhetorical and material practices and, subsequently, for its divergent effects and affects. The logic operative behind the ongoing catastrophe in Israel/Palestine thus remains partially unexplored.

To put it otherwise, the question at hand is topical rather than typological: not to which type of nationalism Zionism and the Palestinian national movements conform but, rather, what their mundane significance is for their respective adherents in particular daily circumstances. The dissymmetry between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, with its dire consequences, is a matter of particular political praxes, of concrete temporal and spatial circumstances, not of theory.

This point would have immediate implications for one's reading of Oz's fiction, for instead of reintegration, one could underscore disaffection as the decisive affect of its denouement. Oz's narratives, in other words, repeatedly fail to resolve the tension between Zionism as liberation theology and Zionism as settler colonialism. At the end of the narrative,

Oz's protagonists all realize that they cannot but be pragmatic; that is, they have no choice but to reembrace the national collective, even if not its values. This pragmatic realization, not an ideological commitment, unleashes great violence whose chief victims, since it cannot be directed toward the collective—the main oppressive force in Oz's novels—are Palestinians. The implications for Oz's politics and his embrace of pragmatism, I think, are obvious.

The antagonism Oz raises becomes conspicuous when juxtaposed with the treatment of the fiction of the Israeli-Jewish author Castel-Bloom. Bernard endeavors to defend her against the charge that she has shifted in her later novels to a more hawkish nationalist position. Coupling her with the Palestinian author Sahar Khalifeh, Bernard argues that the fiction of both should be read as a counterpoint to the strategies of national narration explored thus far, yet not in the familiar way in which women's writing is opposed to men's. As she notes, both the domestic and the international reception of women's writing assumes that it necessarily subverts the masculinist structure of national narration. The challenges that their fiction mounts notwithstanding, however, both Castel-Bloom and Khalifeh still set their narratives within the nation as the primary frame of reference. Indeed, the differences between their literary aesthetics—Castel-Bloom's fiction a postmodern satire, Khalifeh's historical realism—notwithstanding, both explore the intersection of gender and nationalism, interweaving the demand for gender equality with the demand for national self-determination. Their narratives thus feature women as both the victims of nation-building processes and their willing and active agents. Ultimately, Bernard argues, their narratives do not so much subvert national allegory as advocate a reform of the idea of the nation. Why, however, should one view Castel-Bloom's reformist platform more favorably than Oz's? The question that hovers over the discussion of the two authors is left without an answer.

The last chapter reveals Shamma's novel *Arabesques* rather than Said's *Out of Place* as the truly paradigmatic text of *Rhetorics of Belonging*. In fact, it seems that Shamma's novel lies outside the frame of political and theoretical presuppositions Bernard probes in her book; the paucity of references to postcolonial scholarship in this chapter, especially when juxtaposed with the way the discussion of other texts—and particularly of Said's *Out of Place*—are embedded in that scholarship, suggests as much. It is a tribute to Shamma's extraordinary aesthetic achievement that, more than any other text, his novel continues to fascinate those who are interested in the culture and politics of Israel/Palestine. In large part, this is surely because the spatial trajectories of the novel's characters cannot be contained by any national imagination, even while the geographic center of gravity of all the narratives—the home village of the narrator—remains unchallenged.

Bernard's excellent discussion of the novel reveals, however, the relative weakness of one component of her theoretical framework that I have not mentioned thus far. For *Rhetorics of Belonging* also seeks to explore Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian texts within the framework of "world literature." Indeed, the latter guides the selection of texts, and the book focuses exclusively on those texts that have achieved the status of world literature in English, making it a particularly useful reference for students in courses in which the language of instruction is English. Bernard sets herself to mediate between the metropolitan reception of these texts and their particular (that is, local) cultural and political work. Yet notwithstanding the accounts of the English circulation of the texts examined, the book does not explore how they participate in the debate about Israel/Palestine *outside* the region; nor does it truly address the ways in which these texts internalize and deploy terms and notions borrowed from a

global context. Rather, as the title of the book—*Belonging*—suggests, time and again, the book underscores the local, rendering all gestures toward global participation only as manifestations of the local.

The discussion of Shammas's *Arabesques* is a case in point. One example should suffice. Bernard comments on a scene that takes place in Père Lachaise, where the narrator observes the proximity of the gravesites of the French Marcel Proust and the Palestinian Mahmoud al-Hamshari. This proximity, Bernard argues, shows that the history of Israel/Palestine is the history of one place. The point serves to support her overall argument in the book, shared by many readers of the novel and arguably by its author himself: that Shammas advances a vision of Israel as a state of all its citizens—that is, as a state that acknowledges all residents in the territories under its control as its citizens, an entity whose principle of belonging is political consent (akin to Said's view) rather than ethnic origin. Yet is not what is at stake in the Père Lachaise scene the relationship of Palestinian life to world literature, as embodied by Proust, rather than its relationship to Israeli literature? It seems that in this scene Shammas quite explicitly gestures beyond the local toward the global, a gesture Bernard curiously truncates.

Notwithstanding these reservations, however, Bernard's *Rhetorics of Belonging* is a rich, insightful study of Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian literature as well as of postcolonial theory. Its greatest merit is that it links questions about Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian literature to questions about the theoretical framework used to read this literature. As such, it truly advances our understanding and appreciation both of the literary corpus and of postcolonial studies. I highly recommend it.

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