A DIFFERENT SELF-SACRIFICIAL NARRATIVE: GAIL HAREVEN'S MY TRUE LOVE

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Hegemonic Israeli writing has appropriated the biblical story of the Akedah (the Binding of Isaac) to depict self-sacrificial acts, performed mostly by male characters who symbolically die for their fatherland/country. While minor voices questioning this narrative can be found as early as the Palmach generation, it was the literature of the 1970’s, 1980’s and 1990’s that offered an ambitious counter-narrative to the Zionist story. From A.B. Yehoshua, Amalia Kahana Carnon and Shulamit Hareven to David Grossman, Orly Castel Bloom and Etgar Keret, authors have ceaselessly applied the trope of the Akedah to their writing, contributing to the Israeli internal debate over its ideological infrastructure. A recent novel by Gail Hareven avoids this heated discussion altogether, and yet, as my paper contends, it forms an alternative link in the chain of self-sacrificial writing in Hebrew literature.

Hareven’s prize-winning novel My True Love [2000] created a furious public debate when it defeated mainstream contenders such as A.B. Yehoshua’s The Liberated Bride. And no wonder. My True Love challenges the form and content of two sets of literary traditions. The first is the Victorian model, whose perception of romantic love was applied to maintain the stability of socially constructed concepts such as marriage and family. Disguised as a confessional narrative, the novel centers on a woman who secretly dedicates her life to the man she falls in love with in her youth.

Through the highly aware character of Noa Webber, Hareven creates a story that also defies Israeli national ideology. Along with the portrayal of her own life as a single mother raising a child in Israel, Webber depicts Israel’s coming of age. Set in the late 90’s, the novel touches upon collective traumas from the Yom Kippur War to the first Gulf War, from the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin to the current suicide bombings in Jerusalem. Presenting the national narrative as a sequence of acute emotional stress shakes the very foundations upon which the Zionist version of the Akedah story is built.

Hareven then further problematizes the self-sacrificial convention. The novel subjects the national story to the personal narrative. This appropriation of the political by the domestic sphere allows the national story to become just another tool through which the personal narrative is formed. The result is a creation of a very persuasive female perspective that offers an alternative to the cycle of bloodshed narrated by the public sphere.

This alternative voice, I will argue, reflects Hareven’s wrestling with a tradition of literary Akedot, among them the one offered by her late mother, Shulamit Hareven. Associating the trope of the Akedah with national identity, young Hareven manages to divest the self-sacrificial act from any traces of Israeli collectivism. She then creates an alternative self-sacrificial story, reflecting perhaps a new generation of writing, a narrative that deliberately lacks the biblical Akedah.