DESSERT SPACE AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS: THE CIRCUITOUS JOURNEY OF THE CITIZEN-SOLDIER IN AMOS OZ’S *A PERFECT PEACE*

Ranen Omer-sherman
University of Miami

Early in his career, Oz discovered that the desert offered a unique environment for posing critical questions about the individual and society that emerged in this period of doubt, for expressing a tangible unease with ideologies that were willfully blind to human realities. An intimate relation to the desert landscape has proved decisive for the nourishment of Oz’s artistic consciousness to a degree unsurpassed by any other Israeli writer. In his attention to the diverse features that link the modern state of Israel to its ancient roots, the desert seems to have been most intrinsic to this mythopoetic dimension of Oz’s imagination. For years he has been a keen observer of this environment, reportedly beginning each day with a pre-dawn walk in the wadis and slopes that surround Arad. Throughout Oz’s novels, the desert expanses, far from serving as transformative or heroic space, often raise the troubling spectre of cracks in the individual’s loyal commitment to the chain of national identity. Some of the novelist’s most memorable characters flee homogenous insularity—even the classic kibbutz ideology that Zionism often touted as one of its proudest achievements—longing for a distinct sense of self, un-reconciled to their surroundings.

Set between 1965 and 1967, when Israel’s Prime Minister David Ben Gurion was already seventy-nine years old, there is a distinct schism between the founding ideals of the parents and their successors, who find themselves weary of what appears to be an endless state of war and its high costs of survival. In *A Perfect Peace* the kibbutz and the wilderness embody the Apollonian and Dionysian polarities of Israeli culture. In this novel, the plot centers around the internal crisis of Yonatan Lifshitz, a young man raised in a kibbutz situated near the ruins of Sheikh Dahr, an Arab village destroyed during Israel’s 1948 War for Independence. The fact of that destruction is a quiet but commanding presence throughout the novel for when a young man raised in the certitude of Zionism wakens to the reality that his comfort hinges on the dispossessed Arab Other, he suffers a violent existential shock, causing him to flee toward an uncertain fate in the desert.

Yet as the interior logic of the novel unfolds, the reader cannot be certain whether Oz is prepared to fully sanction the political implications of his character’s troubled awakening. For that quest seems so compromised by the hero’s narcissism and selfishness that the novel ultimately affirms the collective national identity as the steadfast antidote to the moral qualms of the self-interested individual.