PHOTOGRAPHY AND POSTCOLONIAL TRUTH IN RONIT MATALON'S THE ONE FACING US

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By the second or third photograph in Ronit Matalon's novel, *The One Facing Us*, the reader is confronted with a perplexing problem. While the reader naturally assumes that photography in the novel is meant as an unmediated visual representation of past and present (literal snapshots into the opaque world of the family, hidden from the protagonist by the upheavals of post-1948) the photographic image itself can not be divorced from a process of invention and fantasy. Indeed, by the end of the novel, the photographs present a more perplexing postmodern conundrum than the literary narrative itself, namely: how to understand a progression of images that, despite their generic and legal connection to something he identify as "real," signify no clear reliable content? How to understand a signifier that, on the one hand, stands as truth itself, presentable in a court of law, and on the other, seems completely conjured?

The problem of photography in this novel is not simply a reflection of the lost family memory of the protagonist and her attempt to regain it through her peregrinations in Africa, Israel, and America. The photographs do bring out these issues, but they also perform a much more fundamental task in the narrative by making any notion of an intact, stable identity problematic. In this, the photographs need to be understood within the context of postcolonial theory which, in its more famous articulations, relies on visuality to counter the ideological projections of verbal expression. Instead, Matalon seems to invert those types of assertions that see within native identity the possibility—perhaps the only possibility—for an Enlightenment-based instantiation of individual "will." Rather, the novel, especially within the photographs, disperses identity beyond standard postmodern ideas, and casts it out into the currents and tides of a complex, convoluted history that would then determine the significance of the various signs—words, images, thoughts—that articulate the self and give meaning to individual and national memory.

In her use of photography, Matalon thus disrupts much more than a simple sense of the individual seeking her personal family identity in a confusing postcolonial and postnational world. By showing us the lie of the photographic image—its inability, that is, to present a static truth—Matalon forces us to theorize the postcolonial condition as something other than the simple identity thesis it is usually seen to describe. In Israeli terms, the unreliability of the photograph challenges the identity politics of a simplistic view of Sephardi-Ashkenazi
history in the country, and indeed makes us rethink how narrative and truth coexist within postcoloniality and within Zionism specifically.