

## On the Becoming of the Mizrahi Male Body

Yochai Oppenheimer, Tel Aviv University, Israel

The representation of the Mizrahi male body in Israeli culture differentiates between the Western Ashkenazi body, which served as the standard of fitness and hygiene and of social functionality, and the Oriental Mizrahi body which, in hegemonic perspective, represented the defective, dangerous opposite of these qualities.

In this context, I find it appropriate to use the concepts defined by Deleuze and Guattari about the body and its variety of emerging forms, which they understand not only as multifaceted forms of resistance to institutional imprint on the body but also as ways of creating flexible and multifaceted alternative possibilities of bodily experience. These concepts may well signify a place where Mizrahim themselves conduct a subversive literary discourse about Mizrahi corporeality, while deconstructing the hegemonic narrative framework related to the Mizrahi body. Dan-Benaya Seri (*Misha'el*) blurs the boundaries between men and women – as well as between humans and animals. Albert Suissa (*Akud*) elaborates on a new language of gestures and body positions that repudiates any meaningful interpretation. Mizrahi writing refused to reproduce the national Zionist Israeli body and was instead attentive to the living body and its multiple possibilities of becoming.<sup>1</sup>

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### I. The Zionist body

The Zionist discourse about the body has been the subject of a large number of recent studies. David Biale has portrayed Zionism as a revolution in traditional Jewish erotic self-perception, arguing that:

One of the central claims of Zionism was that the Jews lived a disembodied existence in exile and that only a healthy national life could restore a necessary measure of physicality or materiality. This ideology was not only based on the body as metaphor; it sought, in addition, to transform the Jewish body itself. (Biale 1997, 176)

Daniel Boyarin has described changing Jewish gender perceptions at the turn of the twentieth century, addressing the attempts by Freud on the one hand and Herzl on the other to challenge the prevalent anti-Semitic identification of Judaism with femininity (which was in turn internalized by Zionist and a-Zionist thinkers alike). They attempted to define a new Jewish identity that would reject feminine and homosexual elements and affirm, unambiguously, male and heterosexual elements.<sup>2</sup> Meira Weiss (2005) has depicted the ideology of the “chosen body” and how it has permeated all strata of Israeli culture. Weiss shows how the cultural discourse of the body structures public rituals of bereavement, gender inequalities, and mass media representations of Israeli life. In each of these areas, discourse prescribes what bodies need to be, in order “to live under the spell of the chosen body” (Weiss 2005, 88). Dror Mishani (2006) has focused on the treatment of the body in three major Israeli novels published in 1986, directing attention to the representation of Mizrahi male bodies. Mishani claims that those bodies are depicted as different from hegemonic Ashkenazi bodies, because they are more feminine, non-aesthetic, thus reproducing what he understands as the return of the repressed Jewish body into the Israeli Zionist discourse. Michael Gluzman (2007, 265) has offered an account of how the Jewish body was confronted in a number of Hebrew fiction’s central texts, finding that the soldier remains the ultimate standard of masculinity, even in texts centering on anti-heroes. The soldier’s body, he maintains, still determines the hierarchical status of all the other possible bodies. Also Gluzman focuses his discussion on the tension between the Jewish body and the Zionist body (p. 28). He reads major literary texts written by Ashkenazi authors showing the hegemonic representation of non-ideal bodies, and concentrating on various phenomena of physical imperfection. Gluzman uses Foucauldian terminology, according to which the Zionist discourse of the body is a “regulatory ideal”; It supervises and regulates the ways bodies should look and behave (p. 24) on the one hand, and on the other hand it defines how bodies – which do not comply with this very ideal – should be punished or denied.

All these studies share an assumption that the discourse constructed around the Jewish male body at the beginning of the twentieth century swung between two poles. At one was the Zionist ideal, signified by a semantic of health, strength, naturalness, fitness, beauty, and youth,

while at the opposite pole was the diasporic image that Zionism sought to expunge. This latter image, created by anti-Semitic Christian culture, also appeared in Jewish self-criticism in the nineteenth century. It is signified by a semantic of castrated masculinity (in other words, femininity), illness, dysfunction, unnaturalness, ugliness, and weakness. This approach interprets the appearance of the national-Zionist discourse in terms of gender – as an intellectual effort to repress the negative image of the Jewish body and to impose masculine (heterosexual, according to Boyarin) values, as part of a process of severing ties to the history of the Exile. Immigration (*aliya*) to the Land of Israel, in this view, was meant to repair the Jews' dysfunctional diasporic bodies. A narrative of healing the body, the perception of the Land of Israel space as a place of healing (in the literature of the Jewish community in Palestine before independence, the *Yishuv*), and the view of the army, after the founding of the state, as the institution that both educated and healed the Jewish nation, has consequently been central in Israeli fiction. An examination of the progress of the discourse on the Zionist body reveals the tense relationship between the ideological Zionist image and the image of the Exile, and pinpoints the fissures and contradictions that call the ideological image into question in places where the implied or explicit footprints of the Exile can be detected. This sort of critical reading, which became accepted in American academic circles in the 1990s and then made its way into the Israeli academic discourse, provided a conceptual framework in which the discourse of the body could be understood. The starting point of such readings was always the explicit (Zionist) dichotomies of health and sickness, beauty and ugliness, normative and defective masculinity, the imagined ideal body and the actual diasporic body that does not internalize the dictates of Zionist ideology.

This set of polarized images was sufficiently strong and durable to position the Mizrahi male body in a role similar to that of the rejected diasporic body. The Western Ashkenazi body continued to serve as a normative model of health and hygiene and of social and sexual functionality, while the Mizrahi body, in Ashkenazi fantasy, was defective and menacing because it exhibited the precise opposite of these traits (Yosef 2004, 35–36). In other variations of this dichotomy, the Mizrahi male body was associated with an outmoded, religious culture, while the Ashkenazi body belonged to a young, vital, strong culture. True, on the

national level, the Mizrahim were perceived to be part of the Jewish national body, and their affiliation with Arab culture was utterly negated in the name of their Jewish identity. But on the intra-Jewish ethnic level, the Mizrahi body was perceived as separate and Other. In this sense, the Mizrahi body was the heir of the diasporic body. Both were rejected; both, from this perspective, needed repair.

This paper offers an account of how the literary discourse written by Mizrahim about the body detaches itself from the Zionist discourse and its dichotomies. Mizrahi writers have evinced a critical awareness of attempts, as part of the melting pot project directed at both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Holocaust survivor immigrants, to impose Zionist values on the Mizrahi body and to expunge its diasporic characteristics. This discourse remained foreign for them, since they had no reason to see themselves as “new Jews,” for whom immigration to the Land of Israel was a step toward the rectification of their diasporic bodies. In this context, it should be kept in mind that the above-mentioned Zionist dichotomy served an ideology of severing ties with diasporic life in Europe. But it never meshed with the self-awareness of Mizrahi immigrants, who did not reject the experience of the Exile, just as they did not rush to make Zionist-Israeli life an imperative. Mizrahi fiction, as I will show below, has frequently addressed the ways in which the body struggled with the social and cultural demands imposed on it. Yet, notably, the demands came not only from the nation, army, and state, and in the form of the Ashkenazi masculine ideal (as can indeed be found in canonical Ashkenazi writing). Principally, rather, it was the family and the ethnic group, with their concepts of life and culture, that demanded the Mizrahi body’s fealty to ethnic-sectorial (Seri, Berdugo), neighborhood (Oz, Busi), gender (Shilo, Rabinian), or religious (Suissa) norms of behavior. It disregarded the dichotomous Zionist terms of normative versus defective masculinity, of health versus sickness, of sociocultural normativity (in terms of, for example, family planning) versus backwardness (having too many children), or in esthetic terms of beauty versus ugliness. Notably, these Zionist binary opposites made no appearance in Mizrahi texts. In their place came different constraints and solutions, in the form of an unfamiliar new language of the body.

Over the past decade, a theoretical and critical discourse regarding Zionist corporeality has deconstructed the Zionist discourse. Its purpose

has been to highlight those strata that the discourse has tended to repress, but which nevertheless continually reappear in Zionist literature and consciousness. The critical discourse is grounded, on the one hand, in the Freudian concept of repression and a dynamic of raising the repressed back into consciousness. But it also invokes Foucault's concept of the body as an object on which a range of functions and meanings are "inscribed." Social coercion and oversight are represented as being prior to the body's identity, whereas Foucault rejected any possibility of speaking of the body as an a priori physical object with an existence independent of the norms that are imposed upon it and which shape it. He also rejected the claim that sexual urges and desires – that rebellious, wild, natural, vital energy that the social order seeks to repress or refine – constitute a primal mental entity.<sup>3</sup> Just as the discourse about sexuality creates, in his view, its own objects – repression, the Oedipal paradigm, guilt – so systems of discourse constitute bodies of various types (Foucault 1978, 81).

Foucault left a theoretical place for the question of the body's resistance, proposing that inscribing on a body must be accompanied by resistance that is not external to the field of power relations (Foucault 1978, 95–96). But his critics have pointed out that Foucault developed only a theory of power, not of resistance, and that his postulation of the existence of resistance is unfounded, given that there is no element (physical, like flesh, or mental, like desire) that can be independent of the power apparatus inscribed on the body (Grosz 1994, 155). His position, which rejects the dual existence of independent and opposed elements, and which tracks power as the sole concept that possesses a total presence, thwarts the possibility of developing a theory of resistance. That would require him to delimit the boundaries of the concept of force and its applicability. Judith Butler suggested that in some places in his writing (for example, in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*), Foucault "seeks recourse to a prediscursive multiplicity of bodily forces that break through the surface of the body to disrupt the regulating practices of cultural coherence imposed upon that body by a regulatory regime" (Butler 1999, 312). She sees in this evidence of an internal rift in his approach, a rift between viewing the body as a "surface" inscribed by regimes of discourse, and viewing it as possessing depth and external standing with regard to these regimes. In her view, this could explain the possibility of resistance.

Butler clearly demonstrates the need to create a theoretical basis for resistance to systems of power. Her theoretical approach has guided research on the issue of the gender characteristics of the imposition of discourse on the body, and has focused on the mechanisms that define heterosexual bodies as legitimate and homosexual ones as illegitimate.<sup>4</sup> Butler has also addressed the marking out of positions of resistance to the discourse of the normative body through parodic practices like impersonation and drag shows.

The theoretical model that the reading of the Zionist body has drawn from the writings of Foucault and Butler has been apt for the dichotomy she sought to illuminate – that between the hegemonic concept of the repaired Zionist body, and the concept of the diasporic Jewish body that ostensibly seethes under the surface and manifests itself in a variety of acts of resistance. However, the critical analysis of the discourse about the Zionist body and its demarcation must take into account the fact that this inclusive concept not only disregards the exclusion of the homosexual body, as Boyarin (1997) has argued, but has also ignored the exclusion of the ethnic Mizrahi male body.<sup>5</sup> In the context of the study of Hebrew literature, Mishani's book (2006) constitutes a first attempt to mark this exclusion, even though the author restricts himself to three canonic texts (by Oz, Kenaz, and Yehoshua) and does not address the possibilities of the non-hegemonic representation of the Mizrahi body. Apart from this, it seems to me that the concepts "power" and "resistance," just like the dichotomous concepts that place the (heterosexual) Zionist body opposite the (feminine, latently homosexual) diasporic Jewish body, are indeed relevant to the description of certain practices of resistance to this same exclusion. But this dichotomy is liable to miss the entire range of the Mizrahi body's manifestation. More appropriate than this binary logic is one of disorder, amalgamation, anarchy, and carnival-grotesque (Bakhtin 1984). Such a logic would bring together different representations and would not be confined to a framework in which one representation rules out another. In this context, I find it appropriate to use the concepts defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari about the body and its variety of emerging forms, which they understand not only as multifaceted forms of resistance to institutional inscription on the body, but also as ways of creating flexible and multifaceted alternative possibilities of bodily experience. It offers,

in my opinion, the prospect of breaking free of the dichotomous power-centered theoretical framework. At the same time, it enables us to shed the particular historical framework that centers on Zionism versus the Exile or *galut*. These concepts may well signify a place where Mizrahi themselves conduct a subversive literary discourse about Mizrahi corporeality. Deleuze and Guattari are well aware of how power mechanisms can exert control over a body in a way that determines meanings and functions:

Let us consider the three great strata concerning us, in other words, the ones that most directly bind us: the organism, significance and subjectification [...] You will be organized, you will articulate your body – otherwise you're just depraved. You will be a signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted – otherwise you're just a deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement – otherwise you're just a tramp. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 159)

That which power systems mark as anomalous margins (to which are attached negative moral and pathological medical meanings), Deleuze and Guattari turn into foci of interest. Precisely at this unmarked place where we cast off the yoke of meanings and identity, we can grapple with the central question: what can the body do, and what might it come to be? The concept that subsumes these unobstructed possibilities of being is the “body without organs.” The term does not refer to resistance to individual organs. Rather, it signifies their organization, which defines and constructs the unitary whole that is imposed on heterogeneous plurality. The suspension of this organization makes it possible to perceive the body as a potential for becoming that stands opposed to its forced transformation into something functional, possessing an economic, frugal logic (p. 158).<sup>6</sup> The question is what the body is capable of turning into and becoming. This goes beyond interest in its possible social achievements. Deleuze and Guattari's postmodernist terminology prefers the term “rhizome” (a term they use in the sense of “small stems”) and “vegetative growth,” which is more varied than the unified image of the entire tree. They choose to emphasize becoming and not the completed being, the unlimited multiplicity of the possibilities of becoming instead of stable dichotomies (man versus woman, man versus beast). Their interest is in the diffuse and the flowing, rather than in the

static and fixed. From their point of view, the clearest prototype of this kind of instability and becoming is “to become a woman.”

In this sense, “becoming” means granting legitimacy to physical and mental movements and processes that stretch beyond the boundaries of the constructed subject and the regime of identities, which assign separate and delimited places for men and women. This concept contains within it attention to the tiny forces that have been socially and culturally repressed and negated by the external forces to which the body is subject. Since Deleuze and Guattari seek to avoid recreating dualistic positions, they refrain from speaking solely of feminine characteristics subverting the stability of the masculine system. Rather, they intend uncounted ways of being, including the possibility of being an animal, a stone, a flower, and certainly a boy or girl.<sup>7</sup> Their concept of the “body without organs” refers to an ongoing becoming without any defined goal, end, or completion. Likewise, being liberated from prevalent systems of discourse and interpretation, it must subvert them, and exist within and outside them simultaneously.<sup>8</sup> I present Foucault’s concepts of “inscribing on the body” and Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the body’s “becoming” as complementary. They enable a discussion of the Mizrahi body’s two contrary manifestations in fiction – on the one hand, the body appears as an object that is controlled and oppressed, while on the other hand it appears as a subject that liberates itself from control and secures an independent life that extends beyond normative boundaries and the familiar set of meanings.

In a pioneering article on the constitution of Mizrahi masculinity in the Israeli cinema, Raz Yosef has argued that the masculinity of Mizrahi fathers was perceived by their sons as being castrated and passive, representing their helpless position in the face of Ashkenazi domination. The tendency to reject this castrated masculinity and to reconstruct active Mizrahi masculinity, Yosef wrote, characterizes the Mizrahi discourse of protest of the 1970s. The models of masculinity created by the Jerusalem-based Black Panthers, the most visible Mizrahi protest group of that period, are one example. But the dichotomy of castrated Mizrahi masculinity and its rehabilitation gave way during the 1980s to a more complex subversive discourse, which Yosef finds in Ze’ev Revach’s comedy films. Their strategy includes grotesque bodily images and elements of impersonation that deconstruct fixed and definable ethnic identity.



“In contrast with the representation of the phallic, tough, and self-possessed Mizrahi body of the Mizrahi discourse of the 1970s,” Yosef writes, “Revach’s practice is to maneuver his body into a grotesque position by distorting its limbs, face, and voice [...] His body is in a process of emergence, of metamorphosis, so his films stress practices of changing identities and disguise” (Yosef 2004, 52). As Yosef sees it, Revach presents the deconstruction of the dichotomy between castrated and rediscovered masculinity, but this is not a position common to all Mizrahi filmmakers, or a critical, subversive position that develops and constitutes a new and independent creative space in Israeli cinema. Rather, it is the work of a single artist whose *burekas* films (Israeli B-movies, usually comedies, with Mizrahi protagonists) have never been perceived to be part of Israeli cinema’s serious canon. No similar studies of the image of the Mizrahi male body in Israeli literature have yet been published.

## II. The dominating gaze on the Mizrahi body

Yehoshua Kenaz’s novel *Infiltration* (1986; the Hebrew title is *Hitganvut Yehidim*) is considered to be the first Israeli novel to portray the breakup of the concept of national unity and its replacement by a concept of multiplicity – an Israeli social and cultural multiplicity that includes Mizrahim alongside Ashkenazi immigrants and Sabras (*tzabar* – the name given to native-born Israelis, who symbolized the new Jewish identity the country sought to create). Critics noted that the novel offers, in an unprecedented way, a distinct Mizrahi voice and, in particular, a Mizrahi bodily presence (Mishani 2006, 38–79).<sup>9</sup> My intent here is to follow Mizrahi literature’s attitude toward corporeality against the background of *Infiltration*. Kenaz’s novel belongs to the canon and marks the end of an era – but not the beginning of a new era. The novel makes no pretense of representing the Mizrahim or the Mizrahi body. Rather, it depicts the Ashkenazi gaze as cast on the body of the Mizrahim, and shows the limitations of that gaze. The novel offers a critical look at the hegemonic gaze, which knows how to mark what it is permitted and forbidden to see. This is the fundamental difference between Kenaz’s writing and that of early writing about Mizrahim. Earlier texts did not critically examine their own gaze, their judgments, and the images they used regarding the self and its relationship to its Others.

Kenaz's writing about the body is nationalistic in the sense that his subjects, a group of soldiers in basic training, are exposed to the system of national symbols and ideals that formulate an ethos of behaviors, meanings that supervise the body and see it as worthy of repair or shaping. This regime attempts to turn the trainees, who are termed "invalids" or "girls," into "men." Given their imperfect health, healing can be accomplished only superficially – none of these soldiers is capable of overcoming his handicaps and being accepted into a combat unit. But the gaze at the body is not only military. According to Kenaz, art, too, is a kind of gaze directed at the unsightly body, with the goal of extracting its beauty. The common use of these esthetic categories in the course of the novel is relevant in particular to the examination of the Mizrahi body. The gaze on the body is thus described in esthetic, not only military terms:

Rahamim Ben-Hamo danced as if possessed by a demon [...] Suddenly a throttled cry escaped from his lips. A shriek of pain or pleasure, and then another, and his face flushed darkly, and as his body went on writhing he stretched out his hand as if in a cry for help, as if the intensity of the pain or the pleasure that was producing one moan after the other from his mouth was too much for him to bear. The ugliness of the animal-like writhing and the moans that accompanied it, of the savage beating on the drum, was so powerful, dark, and fascinating that it hardly seemed ugly at all. (Kenaz 2003, 95–96)

The esthetic of the ugly that, at the extreme, becomes beautiful – that is, liberated from the constraints of situation, place, and time – is a Western esthetic that the characters and narrator frequently adduce. Handel's music, hummed by Yossi Ressler, a violinist and artist at heart, is described in a similar way. Even the narrator's imaginings about the physical fitness instructor, a woman, whom he and his comrades see as the embodiment of a mythological personage (p. 75), reveal a gaze prone to repair what seems ugly and to impose a type of beauty on it. This esthetic was inscribed on the Mizrahi body in order to grant it a positive meaning that affiliated it not only with the military order (masculinity) but also with the cultural order (the beautiful). But the enlistment of the Mizrahi body into the esthetic space is not accomplished without resistance. A Mizrahi soldier's act of resistance is to dance, but he is humiliated by a commander, himself Mizrahi, who sneers at the "bloody dancing" and castigates the sweat-drenched soldier: "Look at you, wet

and panting like a whore” (p. 98). Even the man trained in the classic esthetic, Yossi Resler, makes a protest:

When they were singing their [ugly] songs and that disgusting Ben-Hamo danced, I felt really frightened: if that’s art too and it has a kind of beauty of its own that we’re simply not used to – like modern art, say – if everything’s relative, then maybe there’s no point in my life at all. If this ugliness is also art, than nothing’s worth a damn. Nothing! (p. 128)<sup>10</sup>

The debate about the inclusion of the Mizrahi body in the field of art, and the question of whether an esthetic gaze can be directed at a “repellent” body, are critical for understanding the Ashkenazi defensive position against the Mizrahi body, which is also a position from which the Westerner takes control of that body. Note that these esthetic criteria may also appear in reverse, as a critique of the craving to look at the Mizrahi body, which becomes an invasive, trespassing gaze. This critique is voiced by Avner – who speaks with “an emphatic Oriental accent” (Kenaz 2003, 5) – with regard to the narrator, who insists on watching as Rahamim pushes away his mother and sister who came to visit him at the base, kicks over the basket of food they bring him and scatters its contents on the ground, then embraces his mother around the waist and breaks into tears. The narrator explains that he keeps looking because he thinks “there was something beautiful about it” (p. 218). For Avner, who has already suffered the narrator’s intrusive gaze – during one of his moments of agony, when he was humiliated by his commander, “by the very fact of looking at them you rob them of their mystery and beauty, you turn them into a caricature, something sick and despicable” (pp. 209–210). The demand to desist from a gaze that invades the suffering of the Mizrahi body and that thus produces his mysterious Otherness is the other side of holding fast to the solid esthetic hierarchy that distinguishes between (Ashkenazi) beauty and (Mizrahi) ugliness. These discrete positions serve to clarify the stability of the esthetic discourse about the Mizrahi body. The novel does not address this question: How can one look at the Mizrahi body without the mediation of this polarization, and what does the Mizrahi body have to offer other than binary labels like beauty and ugliness?<sup>11</sup> In this respect, Kenaz stands at the end of an era of the representation of Mizrahiyyut in general and of the Mizrahi body specifically. It is no coincidence that authors of Mizrahi

fiction written from the end of the 1980s onward felt duty-bound to break free of the subjugating presence of the Ashkenazi gaze and the values that were signified so clearly by it. My reading of groundbreaking Mizrahi writers like Seri, Suissa, Berdugo, and others focuses on the possibility of broadening the representation of the Mizrahi body beyond these boundaries, which had previously been prevalent and constantly reproduced in Israeli fiction.

*III. Liberating the Mizrahi body from the gaze: The fantastic representation*

Dan-Bnaia Seri's fiction consistently addresses the Old Yishuv – the traditional Jewish community in Palestine that predated the Zionist immigration that began at the end of the nineteenth century – rather than Mizrahi immigration and the question of “the Oriental communities” (*edot ha-mizrah*). The remoteness of this context – the Bukharian quarter of Jerusalem – illuminates Mizrahi experience as an independent, separate life uninfluenced by the historical, social, and economic processes occurring around it. Seri eschews an examination of the causes of the poverty, ignorance, and backwardness of this society, which might divert attention to the modernization processes that passed over it. His refusal to accept the hegemonic “discourse of modernization” concerning the Mizrahim (Hever, Shenhav, & Motzafi-Haller 2002) places his writing in a different place from that of other Mizrahi authors of the 1980s. These writers themselves experienced immigration to Israel and struggled principally with the encounter between Mizrahi immigrants and the state. Their interest, therefore, was in serving as tribunes for the mistreated immigrants. Seri, however, was born in Jerusalem and does not write as the representative of Mizrahi society or cast himself as its spokesman, just as he displays no nostalgia for it. He is not interested in depicting its unique way of life, history, and sources. Rather, he sees (Bukharian) Mizrahi society as raw material for molding an ahistorical account of pathological mental processes that stand out in their baseness, agony, disturbances, and distortion.

Unlike Mizrahi writers before him, Seri consistently chooses to stress how ugly his characters are – “to uglify the ugly” (Shaked 1992, 27) – and how bestial. He exposes the common tendency in Hebrew literature and

Orientalist writing as a whole to explain the differences between East and West, or between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, as self-evident. This is accomplished by attributing them to external distinctions, juxtaposing the ugly and the beautiful, the bestial and the human, and other such sets of contrasts. But while such binary oppositions have, because of political correctness, appeared in very limited quantities in literature written by writers with European backgrounds,<sup>12</sup> in Seri's writings they appear not to stabilize ethnic identities but rather to challenge the very concept of identity. The Mizrahi body, as a whole organism, fixed in its appearance and its gender, is put to the test. The gaze directed at it is attentive to every sign of change and dissolution, to every crack that appears in its unified image.

The earliest appearance of the Mizrahi body as cryptic, different from the normative, functional body, is in Seri's story "The Life and Death of Regina Mansoura" (Seri 1987, 79–196). The story opens with a declaration that, even after her death, Regina Mansoura's body did not stop growing. One index finger continues to move and to live independently, and this incredible phenomenon piques the curiosity of doctors and scientists from all over the world. This disruption of the distinction between living and dead bodies leads to unexpected changes. The dead woman becomes beautiful and desired by her husband; her daughter cleans and clothes the finger to ward off the evil eye, and their home becomes a popular tourist spot. The disruption also affects community life. The municipal government paves a new road that leads to the Mansoura family's home. But the neighbors, after discovering the carcasses of mice under their beds, fear that the woman's body might transmit disease. The story magnifies and reproduces the miraculous event – the woman's index finger acts strangely, and so do the fingers of all the other characters. Her husband, Rahamim, one night encounters a vision of his late father, who tries to extract Rahamim's watch from his pocket. When the son tries to stop his father, "his hand did not obey him. It rested like a tree trunk on the mattress" (p. 109). The young man betrothed to his daughter is missing his little finger, and it later transpires that he is missing at least three fingers. The explanations offered by the text to make these remarkable phenomena sound reasonable – for example, that the prospective son-in-law bites his nails, or that "such things have been known to happen" (p. 79), categorize the story as part of that genre of

fantasy that domesticates that which seems extraordinary and unreasonable (Todorov 1973), either by multiple repetition, or by explanations that fit it into logic and the social order by force. The story's characters do not preoccupy themselves with the question of how such remarkable phenomenon could be possible. Instead, they cope and learn to live with them over an extended period of time, in the hope that they will be able to escape their negative consequences. Seri sometimes portrays such situations in a comic, lighthearted way, as in the story at hand, or in a serious-tragic and introverted way, as in the novel *Misha'el* (1992). But its varied realizations, and the repeated use of this basic situation by Seri and other Mizrahi writers, make it abundantly clear that its deep structure addresses the boundaries of the body's ability to "become" – that is, to change steadily over time.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming, especially of becoming a woman, can help clarify Seri's position. *Misha'el* does not suffice with a dead woman's index finger that insists on continuing to move, or a living person's finger that refuses to move. Rather, the novel centers on a much more complex and interesting example of the extraordinary – a widowed and childless man who, after his wife's death, discovers that he is pregnant.

The story follows *Misha'el* as he acquires female traits during his pregnancy, while after the birth it recounts the restoration of his male characteristics. His symptoms are unambiguous (morning sickness, sensitivity to certain smells and tastes, swelling of the breasts, and an expanding belly; he senses fetal movements, feels labor pains, and his waters break). Furthermore, he undergoes hormonal and physical changes – he loses his body hair and his male sexual organs metamorphose into female ones.<sup>13</sup> *Misha'el* notes many female markers on his body, but those around him do not discern his "new profile" (Seri 1992, 121), and continue to treat him like a man. They even try to find him a new wife, in keeping with the mores of a traditional society regarding a childless widower. The novel's plot thus splits in two. One part is the protagonist's masculine narrative – unsuccessful matchmaking – and the other his unexpected feminine narrative – pregnancy and birth. The two story lines are meant to solve his central problem – his childlessness and sterility, which are perceived as an exceptional social state that requires repair.

Seri offered a similar paradigm of sterility in earlier stories. The protagonist of “Simantov’s Thousand Wives,” (Seri 1987, 78–79) for example, murders his three wives and is unable to have children – not because of any physical deficiency but because he is unable to have normal intimate relations. In *Misha’el*, however, the interest in twisted souls is shunted to the sidelines. Instead, the novel grapples with deformities of the body. Misha’el’s childlessness has a physiological cause rather than a mental one – his testicles are “empty” and “sick” (Seri 1992, 134). But the cure is original and radical – instead of his protagonist seeking out a woman who has proven herself to be fertile (one such is offered to him), the author provides him with female physiology that enables him to become pregnant and give birth.

Seri is interested here in intermediate states, not gender reversals. Misha’el’s organs become feminine, but his appearance loses nothing of its masculinity. His mental state, too, is intermediate – on the one hand, Misha’el continues, as a man, to fantasize about his boundless sexual prowess and the pleasures awaiting him with his future bride, as if his body had not changed (Seri 1992, 45). On the other hand, he also fantasizes maternally, both about the future of his baby and about his hopes that his increased consumption of milk, as recommended by his physician, will make him more fertile and enable him to have not just one but two babies (p. 66). This choice of intermediate states, both physical and mental, places the focus not on stable identity but rather on the process of becoming a woman. It is a new and startling option, never before attempted in Hebrew literature. To this should be added that the story supplements this becoming of the Mizrahi body with a well-organized structure of less dramatic becomings. While these remain on the margins of the story, they offer a variety of examples of the flexible boundaries of gender identity.<sup>14</sup>

In the absence of any psychological or social logic that explains this extraordinary transformation, it remains an inexplicable riddle. The body tells an “unnatural” story that divests itself of familiar gender representations, despite the efforts of all those involved to domesticate and control it – whether with violence, coercion, words, or logic. The novel does more than systematically challenge gender boundaries and create an intermediate zone in which feminine and masculine elements can blend into a different and hitherto unknown combination. The daring

preference for a state of becoming requires relinquishing boundaries – for example, between man and beast. It is more than just an exceptional, irreversible fantastic event like that in Kafka's "Metamorphosis." It offers an abnormal possibility of contact between animals and humans, like that which might be negated by social discourse. Seri, unsurprisingly, uses animals as metaphors for human beings, especially for the repellent side of the latter.<sup>15</sup> More interesting, however, is the transition from metaphor to animal metonymy, which offers proximity and contact between humans and animals as an explanation for the manifestation of brutish traits in humans. In this view, humans who have had physical contact with animals, or who have spent time in their company, give birth to animals that in time become human, or to creatures with animal traits – like the "peculiar" baby who "had the marks of all those animals that his mother had associated with before his birth" (Seri 1992, 46). The central story is embellished with Bukharian superstitions and legends about animals and gender crossing, both in order to explain why people attribute Misha'el's enigmatic pregnancy to a sexual act he ostensibly committed with an animal, and to explain why Misha'el himself considers the possibility that a calf "duped him and came on him from behind" (p. 61). The traditional discourse that is available to Mizrahi society when it seeks to explain such hybrid states appears to banish and proscribe violators of cultural taboos. But this "primitive" discourse enables the use of the hybrid also as an option that suspends the boundaries between human and beast and creates bodies that not only combine feminine and masculine attributes, but also human and animal ones.

Criticism of the novel entirely missed its convention-breaking treatment of the Mizrahi body. Writers focused on the subject of hunger and the link between eros and eating (Bartana 1992), or unfulfilled wishes (Zilber-Vitkon 1993, 41–43). Critics also failed to grasp the novel's use of the grotesque (Shai 1992; Blair 1993). In particular, they viewed the subject of the body and the question of "natural" cultural boundaries as marginal, even negligible. At most, Gershon Shaked wrote in his article on the novel, "the animal metaphor expresses the author's inclination to augment revolting states of hunger and sexual desire with depictions of perversion" (Shaked 1992, 27). Furthermore, he "explicates" the male pregnancy in a single sentence, using a worn psychologistic paradigm: "The pregnancy is a punishment imposed on Misha'el by his



unconscious, for not having been able to impregnate his wife; he must die because he caused her death” (p. 31). Shaked (pp. 24–25) catalogued Seri as Amos Oz’s heir, casting in stone a reductive framework for understanding Seri’s work. He missed its uniqueness by associating it, to its detriment, with familiar canonical literature. Shaked and others received Seri’s early writing with superlatives but, in the final analysis, what they saw was a facsimile of existing literary values and familiar positions. Since Seri was a “literary” rather than political writer, critics could praise the “beauty” of his writing, its linguistic strata, and his artistic depiction of social unsightliness and ethnic backwardness. But its radical aspect, which also began to appear in the works of young Mizrahi writers at the beginning of the 1990s, was overlooked.

#### *IV. Inscribing the male body*

In his studies of penal systems and the history of sexuality, Michel Foucault depicts the body as an object on which society and culture inscribe their messages, in order to make the body a part of the sociocultural system. The body is thus in this sense not a biological entity. Instead, it is an object supervised by meanings and authority (Foucault uses the neutral term “forces”), in accordance with the “disciplines” that they impose on both the individual and collective body. Foucault focuses on society’s specific mechanisms for exerting its control over deviant individuals. One such was the pre-modern medical system, which defined and supervised “madmen” and “madwomen” (Foucault 1971); another is the penal system, which deals with criminals and transgressors of the law (Foucault 1979). In later works he turns his attention to oversight systems that operate on all individuals, not just deviants, and which create and define the subject’s “internal” and “private” world. His studies of the history of sexuality show that supervision and power are not only external and repressive forces (as in Freudian thinking) and are not responsible only for censorship, deterrence, and restraint. Rather, supervision and power themselves construct sexuality, define its rules of conduct and modes of deviance, and thus channel, and even stimulate, creative power. Sexuality is neither prior to nor independent of the oversight system (Foucault 1978). In Foucault’s thinking, the body is always in the process of being inscribed upon. It is defined, disciplined, and signified, never a blank slate.

Wherever there are social relations, inscribing the body can be both metaphorical and metonymic (that is, concrete). This inscription precisely defines obligations and prohibitions, such as the right to punish another person's body (for example, a father's authority over his children's bodies, a teacher's over the bodies of his or her students, a mother's control of her daughters' bodies, a husband's of his wife's body). It lays out dress and behavioral codes within and outside the family. Mizrahi writers have been sufficiently independent and confident to lay bare the means by which Israeli society supervises the Mizrahi body, and offer a critical examination of these mechanisms.

In his novel *Akud* ("Bound"), Albert Suissa makes a point of marking the body both as a repository of sins and as an object of repair. For example, his father character, ensconced in a culture of prohibitions and the didactic practices used to propagate them, evinces originality, an independent ability to improvise new prohibitions for the body:

"The hands eat you" – Mr. Monsignor always used that expression, believing that the hands were the abode of most evils and appetites, and that hands were ever ready to pocket any object that had owners, to touch the impure and the forbidden, to beat, to break, to soil, to touch places beyond the bounds of good manners; so he brought up his children to keep these plotters of evil clasped behind their backs, not in their pockets, because behind the back is a visible place, and then, since the body has nothing to do, one's mind turns to thoughts of remorse, which are good for behavior. (Suissa 1991, 94–95)

The point of view of the son, who agonizes over his inability to live up fully to his father's expectations, completes the description of the oversight mechanism. The inscription on his body is reflected in his internalization of religious law and rhetoric concerning the body and its appetites and sins, about which he, at the age of 13, is already well informed:

He has no less trouble with his appetite for food than with his other appetites, and it, too, is instigated by organs that groan and sin, discharge and consume [...] In the end, there was not a single organ in his body that was not willing to sin, to see, to hear, or to eat in sin [...] an affliction spread through his body, the body that was soft and very pleasant for him. Even his fingernails, which were as long and pretty as a woman's, were rendered impure where they arched above the flesh of his fingers, and he was compelled to trim them. Even the curls on his head could be a barrier to his *tefillin*, so he would soon have to shave them. (p. 112)

The discourse about the body manifests itself in prescriptions of procedures for rectification and how these procedures are to be implemented (trimming, shaving, the requirement that the hands remain behind the back). In inscribing itself on the body, society invokes the Torah and tradition. But it may go further – and Suissa confronts his readers with further, surprising manifestations of how society imposes its authority on the body. The mother makes a practice of pinching her son and leaving blue marks on his hands that take two weeks to fade (Suissa 1991, 152), or disdainfully shaves off his hair “just as they shave the heads of thieves and traitors” (p. 32), and she dreams of punishing him because he ran away from home just before his bar mitzvah celebration:

If he brings any shame on them, if they call on her to bid him farewell before he mounts the gallows – she intends to lean down to him, as if she means to whisper something, and right there tear off his ear with her teeth, for not listening to her, and then she will seek to comfort him and kiss him on the mouth and then immediately bite his tongue, for not having told her. (p. 253)

The father, while more restrained in his physical treatment of his children (and who is thus the reverse of the stereotypical child-beating Mizrahi father) dreams of a similar form of contact, even though he fears that penetration may be to his detriment:

He was overcome with a fierce impulse to stick his finger down their throats and force them to vomit the forbidden meat that they had stuffed into themselves with such pleasure, to vomit it out with their very guts. But would they not also bite into his finger until it bled? Would he not be giving them a reasonable claim against him – “Our father is going crazy” – so that they could dive back into the night in trail of their prey? (p. 109)

Control of his son’s body is thus not limited to the letter of the law. It may turn invasive in order to impose punishment or enforce subordination, it could become an act of incarceration (the father locks his son in a storeroom because of his strange behavior at school), or evict him (his mother locks him out of the house) and inflict pain on him (a teacher bends Ayush’s fingers). The range of ways to control bodies is clearly formulated by the boy himself:

The boy was hostile to the possessiveness with which his parents treated the bodies of their children – trapping them between their knees, pinching them on the cheeks, beating them when needed, hugging and kissing them devotedly or

hurriedly, telling them to stand up or sleep, dominating them without any limits. He viewed his parents as the easier part of his life's tribulations – they were a superfluous issue to be circumvented, and he treated them like someone who considered the matter settled. He would never let them forget that they had taken him to kindergarten in a red dress among all the girls and had forced him to sing, in his special alto, the blessing over the first candle of Hanukah. (p. 50)

The contradictory declarations about his parents' possessiveness (is he really reconciled with his parents' actions and willing to forget the humiliation they caused him?) reinforce their control and make clear his need to repress its trauma. Furthermore, his parents' control affects the boy's gender identity. Their placement of him among the girls is part of a larger history of the sexual exploitation of his body by older people. His ordeal begins at home, but it continues cruelly outside it as well. The instability of his sexual identity derives, on the one hand, from the fact that his body is compelled to play a female role, and on the other hand from his perception that this is normative. Ayush wishes "to be reincarnated, at least once, as one of those girls, actually in their flesh, how good it would be if he had breasts and hips of his own" (Suissa 1991, 83); "That whole hazy time he did not know toward whom to direct his male organ, to males or females, to his experienced hands or to the neighborhood dogs" (p. 134). Like his parents and others who take advantage of him, he compels his beloved doll to dispense with her signs of sexuality – he cuts her hair, dresses her in men's clothing, and is distressed to see that he has

created a kind of strange creature, lovely and clever, revealed to him in human form, and in fact it was really two little demons, a man and woman in a single body. As if magically, the awful, most awful solutions, the strange hermaphrodite he has created, begins to soothe him. (p. 222)

The femininity consistently imposed on his body becomes a mechanism of self-castration whenever erotic desire surfaces in his consciousness. Inscribing the body thus becomes an act of violent subordination not only of his actions, organs, and their functions, but principally of his sexual identity.

#### *V. The dismantling of the body into organs*

The possibility of detaching the body from its accepted representations first appeared, in a very central way, in Suissa's *Akud*. The narrative's

context constrains the possibilities of deviating from norms of behavior. It takes place within a society of North African immigrants that strictly controls its young people through a tight system of supervision (parents, teachers, neighbors), in the framework of a strict and conservative religious conceptual world. This system marks every deviance as a “transgression,” “dissolution,” and “harlotry,” especially when the transgressor is a woman. But it is, in fact, against this background of tension that the novel seeks to locate the possibilities open to the body for deviating from the familiar language of gestures, both in its passive and active states. As a result, we find in the novel not only manifest movements of protest or provocation, but also movements that leave the reader mystified – that is, movements that go beyond semantics that can be clearly understood.

Here is one example of postures that are disconnected from any code that can be identified:

The moon illuminated the face of the dismembered and open-eyed doll as reflected in the mirror on the door. Her eyes gazed into his. His sisters turned over on their sides in concert and watched him. It didn't make sense, Beber thought, that all those who had gathered for this event were now frozen in positions that one could not endure during the day even for a short time; he himself had his legs bent and his limbs draped over the wardrobe. The head of the brownish girl is drooped and his eyes were open and unblinking, and his sisters were lying on their sides, presumably asleep, and yet they were all moving the silent limbs of their bodies, whispering in their dreams and scheming in their thoughts.

After his limbs thawed, his attention turned to her arched chest, in absolute contradiction to her head that flopped backwards in a frozen yawn; and to her hips which, in contradiction, were twisted on their side, turned toward him at a soft, endearing angle; and at her long legs that crossed in an open, weary position; and as a whole it seemed to him as if she had been taken out of one of the last pages of a cinematic novel, because her arms hung loosely behind her back as if they were braiding her hair, finishing off the twisted line of her body. (Suissa 1991, 67)

The unreasonable body positions produce a combination of passivity and activity, apathetic distance and provocative closeness. This duality extricates the body's language from the defined space of literary representations and creates a new range of connections between the body's disparate organs, a combination that is full of contradictions.

The dismemberment of the body by the gaze turned on it – whether the purpose is to reconstruct it in a surprising way, or to leave it in pieces that can no longer be joined into a recognizable entity – appears in almost every description in Suissa's book. In most cases, a reader can sense mild distortions; in other cases they are severe, especially when the situation is emotionally charged. When the boy peeks through the keyhole into his mother's room, for example, he may be confronted with an unexpected scene. The mother and her friends are revealed in their nakedness, but it is not the erotic stimulation that attracts our attention:

Among the bowls and damp towels, the women's bodies looked like endless sand dunes in a desert, and from among them, as his pupil fluttered over the rising and falling breasts, he could for an instant catch sight of parts of the body as potent as wild beasts, like a fingernail anointed with blue nail polish, a burnt splotch of nipple, a navel breathing and undulating, loose black hair from which a white shoulder suddenly emerged, like a limb that has eyes to see with. Ayush felt tickly prickles on the soles of his feet and tension in his neck. (Suissa 1991, 117–118)

The description does not focus on his violation of the taboo of seeing his mother naked. Instead, Ayush sees a jumble of organs unconnected to a whole organism, and these derive life from their disconnection. Appropriately, Suissa's depiction of the boy's reaction stresses his surprising feelings. Both the organs that are stimulated (the soles of his feet and his neck) and their middling intensity (tickle, tension) diverge from the rhetoric of the usual physical responses to such a stimulus, and thus seem novel and fresh. The book contains a veritable lexicon of positions, movements, physical sensations, and sounds that has no precedent in Hebrew literature. Walter Benjamin's account of Kafka's language of gestures is apt:

The gestures of Kafka's figures are too powerful for our accustomed surroundings and break out into wider areas [...] Each gesture is an event – one might even say, a drama – in itself [...] This animal gesture combines the utmost mysteriousness with the utmost simplicity. It is possible to read Kafka's animal stories for quite a while without realizing that they are not human beings at all. When one encounters the name of the creature – monkey, dog, mole – one looks up in fright and realizes that one is already far away from the continent of man. But it is always Kafka; he divests the human gesture of its traditional supports and then has a subject for reflection without end. (Benjamin 1982, 121–122)

Benjamin's account may be applied to Suissa's writing, which evinces no interest in bodily movements or practices of familiar symbolic content, just as it does not seek to complement these movements with commentary that clarifies their position within the framework of traditional movement. His extreme realist approach prefers unstylized movement that cannot be deciphered – that is, the movement that takes place within a one-time, exceptional event, as part of a process that Deleuze and Guattari called “deterritorialization.” His characters' fascination with the act of defecation, in particular defecation outdoors, is one example.

Few characters in Ashkenazi Hebrew literature are preoccupied with their excrement. That reflects, to some extent, the distance these writers maintained from the body and its lower, “repulsive” functions.<sup>16</sup> But Mizrahi literature does not shy away. Aside from Suissa's *Akud*, Nir Damti, the protagonist of Kobi Oz's *Avaryan Tza'atzua* (“Petty Hoodlum”) (2002), is preoccupied with his anal discharges, and the heroine of Sami Berdugo's *Kakha Ani Medaberet im Ha-Ruakh* (“And Say to the Wind”) (2002) holds herself in for hours during a visit to Afula and finally decides to pee by a memorial to fallen soldiers. Another example is the description of what visiting uncles and aunts leave in the toilet in Yossi Avni's *Ke-Neged Arba'a Banim* (“Four Sons”) (1998). Oz's portrayal of defecation has the usual sense of protest – the petty criminal smears feces on the car of a social worker, places turds next to a bomb shelter, tries to soil the entrance mat of the neighborhood club and, at the end, as he floats through the air on a motorized parachute, he

shits on a police car, shits on police inspector Sisera, shits on the soil that is drenched in the blood and piss of suckers. I shit on this country, that shat on me all my childhood. I shit on teachers who don't know how to give a lesson without humiliating [pupils]. (Oz 2002, 178)

The lengthy list brings home the transition between the actual act of the discharging body and its symbolic dimension, which blurs the presence of the body by focusing on the national institutions that he fouls in an act of imaginary protest. Suissa, in contrast, consistently refrains from symbolizing the body and its functions. Defecation is far from being a violent cliché; it does not convert the primary, intimate meaning of excrement and the action of releasing it with its subsequent cultural

meaning (discharge, filth). The enjoyment of defecation in natural surroundings, alongside some wildflowers, is an opportunity to concentrate and to make up stories while suspending the dichotomy between what is perceived as a lower bodily function and what as higher spiritual function. If we take into account the willingness to hold back so as to be able to rid oneself of bodily wastes without disturbance, we can understand the effort to disengage bodily functions from the value (negative in this case) with which they have been marked. The purpose is to reveal, once again, the primal enjoyment inherent in the act. The critics have reverted and marked the bodily emissions that appear in the novel as “anal,” that is, as “eroticism that would seem to be borrowed from some other, strange stage of evolution” (Hirschfeld 1991, B8) which should, of course, be overcome as part of the process of maturation. This irrelevant concept of “anality” has misled critics into ignoring the novel’s uniqueness and its innovative language of gesture.<sup>17</sup>

The radicalism of the bodily gesture, along with forgoing the accepted repertoire of gestures, creates a foreign language that is not ethnic, and certainly not Israeli. It is an entirely esoteric language that invents its own codes, movements, and surprising uses of the body’s organs, which are required to function in unprecedented ways. Here, for instance, is an example of a gesture that turns into a startling ceremony of covenant and emotional obligation, precisely because it is improvised and unprepared: Beber chases Yvonne, his orphan cousin, and when they come to a halt,

Beber held out a finger and sent it in her direction like a hissing snake, cautiously but with a determination that mesmerized her ribs, and when the finger reached her dry lips, it pushed its way into her mouth, and Beber emitted a kind of jabbering whisper that sounded like a fanatic vow, dangerous and uncompromising, with a touch of desire and a touch of fear and pity, while Yvonne, her anger surging, meant to plunge her teeth deep into the flesh of the chunky finger, but this burning thought was immediately swallowed deep down her throat with her saliva, and an expression of acceptance passed over her sun-beaten face, and her tongue slowly responded to the infantile assertiveness in her mouth, and her saliva welled up thickly and covered his hand like melting ice cream in the hand of a small child. (Suissa 1991, 58–59)

What might be classified as a metaphor for rape and male violence turns out to be an unfamiliar type of erotic contact that has both maturity and infantility, both cruelty and compassion. That which at first arouses



the anger of the teeth afterwards arouses the softness of the tongue. This dizzying range of behavior and emotion eschews all stable and certain meaning, and of course all hazy mystery. It always prefers metonymy – the complex and foreign realism that is meant to remain baffling, in order to teach the reader that the body and, in particular, its different organs, are a hidden treasure of concrete and precise possibilities that have yet to be learned adequately.

The dismemberment of the body into autonomous organs, and the development of the dismembered body's language of gestures do not contradict the effort to reassemble the body according to a different set of laws. These laws require a suspended description and drama that goes beyond the framework of a brief scene. Such a set of laws might succeed, principally, with the termination of the gaze that constitutes the self and its normative body – the gaze of the father and the educational and judicial systems – which also means the cancellation of the communication that takes place through the gaze. In order to challenge the system of norms that inscribes itself on his body, the story offers an account of Ayush's punishment by his teacher, who sends him to stand in the corner with his face to the wall. Ayush refuses to obey, however, when the teacher tells him, several hours later, to return to his seat. The result is a drama lasting three days, during which Ayush stubbornly continues to stand in the corner, pretending to be blind and refusing to speak with those around him. His transformation into a blind person succeeds in undermining the confidence of his teachers and intimidating his classmates, who are astounded by the change that has come over him – their faces “are overcome with the look of those who have encountered demons” (Suissa 1991, 162). Indeed, Ayush's acting like “a real blind man,” feeling his way around the classroom and outside it after the end of the school day, evinces a body language of rebellion that is common to all of them: “As if they had been at the scene of a crime and had been unwilling witnesses to some horrifying event that took place within them as well and which they did not know how to explain” (p. 161). The voluntary and parodic and extreme imitation of the means of punishment, by Ayush himself, impairs his teachers' ability to inscribe his body. It creates subversive rules of behavior precisely because the body renounces the need to fit itself into the interpretation, speech, and gaze of those who hold authority and power. His lack of movement is

threatening to the extent that he suspends the accepted manners of dialogue with those who claim the right to educate him, and to mold him as a son and as a pupil. His transformation into a becoming entity offers a language of gesture that casts aside authority and which has no precedent in Hebrew literature.

*VI. "It was like I was only a belly"*

This type of metonymic realism served as a creative force in Mizrahi writing of the 1990s, as well as in later attempts to expand it in new directions. It was a poetics of dismembering the body into organs and the liberation of organs from conventional meanings and gestures, with the purpose of creating new rules of movement and posture. Sami Berdugo uses it in entire passages in which one organ detaches itself from the whole body and itself becomes a protagonist, a focal point, the lens through which the story is seen. This is not, of course, a miraculous liberation of one of the organs, as in Gogol's "The Nose." Instead, the individual organ is given a voice that belongs to the whole body but which is nevertheless momentarily distinct from it, and asserts its independence.<sup>18</sup> The narrator in Berdugo's novel *Kakha Ani Medaberet im Ha-Ruakh* ("And Say to the Wind") (2002) is a sensitive, unassuming woman who is able to concentrate on each of her feelings discretely and place each one at the focal point of her consciousness. She focuses on her belly when she describes a sexual encounter she has had in a glove shop in Paris. There, the body's physical presence takes the place of the usual fictional "inner" voice. Her pangs of conscience for having betrayed her husband, her apprehensions about the future, her disorientation in time and space, even the words that impose a conventional meaning on the surprising event – all this is shunted aside by her stomach's independent voice:

I felt a pleasant turning in my belly, which instantly accepted this pleasure and knew that something else had entered it, and it was like I was only a belly, without anything else that was connected to me, and which told me what time I was at and how it would all end. (Berdugo 2002, 132)

Her description of the abdominal pains that attack her afterwards at the train station show that this protagonist has little control of her body, especially in exceptional situations: "I went down on my knees and lowered my head to the floor, letting my belly expel whatever it could,

and feeling how it was not in my hands, when my breath rose into my throat and almost suffocated me and discharged a harsh fluid from my mouth” (p. 134). Her loss of control over one of her body’s organs is not perceived as a reason for discomfort. The opposite is the case – in a state of intense emotion, it contains healing and repair. The organ that liberates itself from control thus acts with full autonomy, but not in order to hurt the body and to create a low comic effect (as in Hanoeh Levin’s stories). Instead, it sharpens the body’s sensitivity by centering on the lone organ’s particular “point of view.” The same thing happens when the narrator tells of her fondness for her husband’s back – its temporary disconnection from his body, during a sexual act, is a hugely arousing experience. Instead of a man and a woman, we have only hands and a back, or some other part of their bodies (pp. 15–16).

This momentary liberation of an organ from the body appears again and again in Ronit Matalon’s novel *Kol Tza’adeinu* (“The Sound of Our Steps”; 2008). Here, too, it turns into a focus of examination, or more precisely an object of desire that finds expression principally through extended and dogged scrutiny. This expropriation means that the “novel” is divided into short, independent fragments. Four chapters are devoted to a description of the hands of the narrator’s mother. These hands are not a symbol, a fable, an allegory, a metaphor, and apparently not even a metonymy. No representation is capable of containing such a measure of detailed, precise realism. The subject is not the protagonist, but his hands themselves as independent entities, different and opposed, an astounding jumble of clashing meanings, along with the surprising addition of “what they were and what they could have been” (Matalon 2008, 27), without surrendering to the traditional division between truth and imagination, reality and fantasy. Here is the Mizrahi body – not subject to the confines of the traditional dichotomy between the beautiful and the ugly, the healthy and the sick, the Zionist and the diasporic. It becomes something entirely different.

## *VII. Conclusion*

This paper has examined the manifestation of the Mizrahi male body – that is, where it deviates significantly from the accepted mold of representation, and to what extent this deviation may be common to

writers of varied literary taste. The work of young Mizrahi writers, beginning in the 1990s, departed in many respects from the hegemonic norms of writing of this period. The norm of representing the body in general, and the Mizrahi body in particular, is one of them.

It goes without saying that Ashkenazi writers also wrote about the body, especially about the tensions between Zionist and other bodies, among them the Mizrahi body, and the stereotypes related to it. (These are no different from the stereotypes that appeared in other European literatures in describing the bodies of Others.) Such representations of the Mizrahi body appeared in fiction just as they appeared in popular culture (one example is the film *Sallah Shabati*). Hanoch Levin's stories and plays began to wear away at the hegemonic Zionist conventions. But his approach was comic, and its influence was thus limited.<sup>19</sup> Beyond this, a number of works have examined the narratives of male and female corporeality and the ideological and cultural conditioning that created and propagated them. These works display a particular curiosity about the places in which the national narrative loses its validity. This is the source of their interest in flawed bodies – those bodies that are incompatible with the normative physical ideal. These include civilians who are too feminine and refined, too intellectual and sensitive, compared to the ideal of the Sabra – as in Amos Oz's *Micha'el Sheli* ("My Michael", 1968), soldiers classified as unfit for combat military service (as in Yehushua Kenaz's *Infiltration*), and a boy whose adolescent physical development comes to a halt (as in David Grossman's *Sefer Ha-Dikduk Ha-Penimi* ("Book of Intimate Grammar").<sup>20</sup>

Since the appearance of the novels of Suissa and Seri, the hegemonic narrative framework has been suspended almost without effort. This literature let loose surprising processes that took shape not only as a challenge to the concepts of character and identity, but in particular to corporeal definition. The Mizrahi body, both female and male, showed itself to be intriguing raw material that did not require the reproduction of the "other" national, Zionist, Israeli, or even Jewish or diasporic body. Rather, it gained independence and legitimacy in its ability to undergo unexpected and irrepressible becomings. In this way, it broke free of the history of the body (or, more precisely, of the cultural tradition in which the body existed, and which defined its functionality).<sup>21</sup> Mizrahi fiction discovered corporeality not only for itself but also for the liberation of

Hebrew literature from the Zionist body and from dichotomous thinking about it. That only a few have discerned this is hardly surprising. After all, Mizrahi fiction as a clear and coherent cultural phenomenon has yet to be recognized, despite increasing interest in these writers in recent years.

#### NOTES

1. This article was translated from the Hebrew by Haim Watzman. All translations from Hebrew texts quoted in the article are his.
2. Boyarin (1997) is at his best when he formulates Herzl's Zionist position and Freud's position as types of assimilation. Here Jews become Aryan men, even though they remain Jewish in name and appearance. Yaron Peleg has critiqued Boyarin's view, in his examination of Hebrew fiction as representing a gender reversal.
3. Foucault (1978, 17–49) called this assumption the “repressive hypothesis” and attributed it to the psychoanalytic tradition. It influenced the Israeli critical discourse of the body. The literary criticism of Mishani and Gluzmann, for example, is based upon the Freudian principle called the “return of the repressed.” However, what might have enriched this discussion concerning the subversive representations of the male body is Butler's developed theory of resistance.
4. According to Butler (1993, 232) even sexual identity is a product of obedience to norms imposed on the material body. This, for example, is how she depicts the declaration of a fetus's sex at an ultrasound examination:

To the extent that the naming of the “girl” is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain “girling” is compelled, the term, or rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a “girl,” however, who is compelled to “cite” the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment.

Butler has pointed out the mechanisms of the constitution of social and gender identity as part of a complex and ambivalent system of power relations within which there is tense activity of confirmation and questioning. (She even views heterosexual and homosexual identities as relative ones that constitute each other, rather than being stable binary opposites.) She utterly rejects the relevance of the concept “sex” as a stable biological identity, putting in its place the category of gender, which is social and cultural, and amenable to change.

5. Ann Stoler (1995) has argued similarly that Foucault's writing consistently and systematically ignores, on the one hand, the connection between the concept of power and the sexual discourse, and, on the other, the historical connections between colonialism and race. The categories of the sexual discourse derive, in her view, from European bourgeois culture and are not valid in the case of non-Western, non-white societies.

6. While they offer examples of “bodies without organs,” they actually mean organs without any normative organization – hypochondriac, paranoid, schizophrenic, drugged, and masochistic bodies (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 166).
7. Deleuze and Guattari offer many animal examples for this process of becoming. In one of his films Robert De Niro, for example, walks “like” a scorpion. But this is not an (external) imitation of a scorpion, and he is certainly not wearing a scorpion costume. It relates rather to something “molecular,” much smaller, that derives from the creation of a scorpion-like cadence of movement and rest, quickness and slowness, that borrows part of the natural scorpion identity (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 274). One additional example comes from the film *Willard* (1972), directed by Daniel Mann. The protagonist of this film identifies “pathologically” with rats. When his condition deteriorates, his voice begins to squeak like a rat’s (p. 233). The examples they offer from Kafka’s stories are especially illuminating – on the one hand, Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis into an insect in “Metamorphosis,” and on the other, an ape’s transformation into a human being, in “A Report to the Academy” (Deleuze 1995).
8. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body and grotesque literary representation contains many of the fundamental insights developed more than 20 years after Deleuze and Guattari:

The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world [...] This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body [...] They can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body as something secondary. (Bakhtin 1984, 317)

9. Mishani has described well the novel’s reception and its different readings, and the central place of Mizrahi corporeality in the work. He argues that the bodies of the Mizrahi basic trainees appear as a late and anachronistic incarnation of the sick, helpless, diasporic Jewish body that the Zionists sought to overcome and expunge from memory. In other words, these Mizrahim serve as a mirror of the European diasporic Jewish trauma that refuses to be forgotten (Mishani 2006, 68). Michael Gluzman has argued that:

The novel thus addresses not only the forms of the body’s subordination and the forms of supervision by power but also forms of resistance [...] Just as the novel offers a virtual encyclopedia of languages and bodies, so it offers an encyclopedia of forms of conduct in the face of power. (Gluzman 2007, 234)

In this context he does not mark out ethnic differences regarding either Mizrahi corporeal resistance or the gaze directed at the Mizrahi body, which is conceived as one of the variety of malformed bodies that appear in the novel.

10. The word in brackets appears in the Hebrew but was omitted from the English translation.
11. An interesting reflection of this subject – the disparity between the esthetic gaze applied to the body and the actuality of the body, which eludes all representation

- can be seen in the treatment of the body of Dafna, Alon’s girlfriend. Alon draws pictures of her naked body in his notebook and shows them to Miki. The latter is impressed with his friend’s artistic talent and asks him not to tell Dafna that he has seen the sketches. Alon replies: “You didn’t see her naked, no way! You saw my drawings, the nakedness I invited for her. It’s not her” (Kenaz 2003, 53). This disparity is especially acute in the case of the Mizrahi body – the esthetic categories (common to all the characters) imposed on it always leave its nakedness outside the picture, outside the gaze, and so outside the novel.
12. Amos Oz’s *Kufsa Shechora* (“Black Box”; 1987) is one of the juiciest examples of the relevancy of these stereotypes without consideration of their political correctness. Oz was able to do this because of the genre he chose – the epistolary novel, in which the narrative consists of ostensibly personal speech or confession directed at a specific person.
  13. The degeneration of his penis is referred to indirectly: two doctors peer into “what remained of Misha’el’s manliness,” through which they can see the fetus’s head (Seri 1992, 186). Looking at his body reflected in a mirror, Misha’el has a harder time than anyone else: “Were it not for that butt of flesh, he could have suspected that he had turned overnight, like Balaam’s ass, into a female” (p. 121).
  14. Mrs. Zirkiot’s husband’s urethra is blocked and his urine comes out from behind, and Yazdi the butcher “began wringing out his tail” (Seri 1992, 158). Paula, on the other hand, “was angry at her mother for having made her a girl, but when she grew up and discovered that she did not get her period, she blessed her good luck” (p. 193).
  15. Misha’el refers disparagingly to the fetus in his belly as “vermin,” “eel,” and “mouse.” Hakham (rabbi) Duek refers to it as a “disgusting calf” (Seri 1992, 200).
  16. Yitzhak Laor’s characters, like those of Hanoach Levin, are often preoccupied with urination or flatulence, but not with defecation.
  17. Batya Gur shows revulsion for the physically ugly: “Suissa has no compunctions about using the ugliest materials, such as repeated (far too many times) descriptions of Ayush’s use of his orifices” (Gur 1991). Yerach Gover (1994), in his empathetic reading of the novel, refers to the scene of defecation among wildflowers as “a life-affirming act.” He does not, however, take notice of the centrality of corporeality and its gestures in the novel. Only Gil Hochberg (2007, 98–105) has addressed this in an innovative and illuminating way, using Kristeva’s term “abjection.”
  18. Freud’s term “partial object” is presented by Slavoj Žižek as an organ that resists being included in the whole body. Žižek adduces the shortest story collected by the Brothers Grimm, “The Stubborn Child,” as an illustration of such an organ. The tale tells of a boy who is punished by God for refusing to obey his mother. He falls sick, dies, and is buried. But his stubborn arm sticks out of the grave no matter how many times it is covered with soil. Only after his mother beats the stubborn arm does it relax and lie at peace. Žižek (2004, 175–176) writes that the stubbornness of the organ itself, even beyond the boundaries of life, is an extreme example of freedom. It should be celebrated and seen as the source of resistance.

19. Farts are the only real threat to petit-bourgeois propriety in his story "Marriage Proposal" (Levin 1986, 135–136).
20. See Grossman 1991; Gluzman 2007.
21. Deleuze's distinction between becoming and history can put this new Mizrahi process in a sharper light:

I became more and more aware of the possibility of distinguishing between becoming and history [...] The event is perceived by history as something that happened in specific circumstances; while the foundation of becoming is that every event extends beyond the historical horizon [...] Becoming is not part of history; history consists only of set of data, and one must go beyond it in order to become, that is, in order to create something new. (Deleuze 1995, 170–171)

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Yochai Oppenheimer (oppenyo@post.tau.ac.il), graduated BA in German Literature and Jewish Philosophy (1983), and MA in Comparative Literature (1986), from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; he studied German Literature at Freiburg University, Germany (1984); PhD (1992). He has been lecturer and senior lecturer (1997–2001) in Hebrew Literature and since 2011 associate professor at Tel Aviv University. His publications include: *The Poetry of Avot Yeshurun* (HaKibutz HaMeuchad, Tel Aviv, 1997); *Political Poetry in Israel* (Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2003); *The Representation of the Arab in Hebrew Fiction* (Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 2008); and *Mizrahi Diasporic Poetry in Israel* (Resling, Tel Aviv, 2012).