# *THE IMAGE OF THE ANGLO-AMERICAN OTHER IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF AMOS OZ'S "A TALE OF LOVE AND DARKNESS"*

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***Abstract:*** *The paper examines the presentation of the British and American alterity in Amos Oz's autobiographical work "A Tale of Love and Darkness". It explores the ways in which England and America are seen by the cultivated inhabitants of a rather poor neighbourhood in Jerusalem, and how this idealized perception from a distance, especially of England, is contradicted by the actual reality nearby. Then we shall focus on the role the United Kingdom and the United States played in the appearance of the state of Israel. The role British and American literature had in the formation of the future writer, but also the indirect role the British and the Americans had in his initiation into adulthood will also be briefly analysed.*

***Keywords:*** *British mandate, American literature, fascination.*

## Introduction. The Self, the Family, Society, History

*A Tale of Love and Darkness* is a work published in 2001 by the Israeli writer Amos Oz. It is considered to be the biggest-selling literary work in Israeli history (cf. Grant, 2004) and "an expert fusion of history and personal life" (*ibidem*), "suffused by the light of love and shadowed by the pain of personal and national darkness". (Waxman, n.d.) In a first-person narration (told by himself, though at some point he gives the floor to one of his aunts) it presents the history of Oz's family entwined with the history of the state of Israel. But although much of the novel centres on its author's childhood and adolescence, he rejects the label "autobiography" that most people attach to it. He does not want it to be called "a memoir" either, but he takes steps to enlighten the readers as to how they are supposed to approach the work and to what it is about.

> I don't like *A Tale of Love and Darkness* to be called an autobiography. I am not even the protagonist of this book. My parents are the protagonists of this book. I'm just a supporting character there. I don't even like it to be defined a memoir […]. In the Hebrew edition the definition is in the title: *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. A tale is good enough a definition. […] And in this tale I wanted to convey the story of the disintegrating of one family – my family – against the background of Jerusalem in the 1940's and 1950's. A heroic epoch which *A Tale of Love and Darkness* presents as a time of shabbiness and disillusionment and yet as an anti-heroic heroic epoch. (*Israel: Between Love and Darkness* 2007)

Moreover, he confesses that he wanted his work to erase the line between comedy and tragedy, as well as the one between fact and fiction.[1]

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[1] That is why, throughout the present paper, I shall refer to the character in the book as *Amos*.



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At the core of the novel lies his mother's suicide committed when she was thirty-eight years old and he was twelve. Therefore, he started writing the book when his anger with her, his father and himself subsided, as an attempt at relieving himself from fury and pain and as an attempt at understanding and explaining what happened. But somewhere in the course of writing he "lost interest in the question of who was the bad guy and who was the good guy completely" and instead, he found himself "immensely preoccupied with tastes and colours, smells and kinds of foods, and idioms and expressions and furniture, everything that populated life fifty or sixty years ago. All the material of life, all the bygone times." (*Israel: Between Love and Darkness* 2007) Consequently, "If any one of you plans to read the 600 pages of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* hoping to find on the last page who was the murderer, don't read my book." (*ibidem*) Also as a consequence of this new interest, the book can be viewed as a record of the way in which people lived in the period described, what they ate, how they dressed, how they furnished their houses, what they did in their spare time.

Oz was born Amos Klausner in 1939 in Jerusalem, which was at the time under British rule. He grew up in a house full of books coming from all literatures, situated near the British army headquarters. When he was nine years old, the state of Israel was born after a vote in the United Nations General Assembly held at Lake Success, New York. The British and Americans played an important part in the conversations his family had among themselves or with friends, in his readings, in the streets of Jerusalem. His family's fascination with Europe and America paralleled and contrasted with their ill feelings for the "oppressors", his first encounter with the photograph of an almost naked woman courtesy of an Italian soldier kept prisoner in the British barracks, the attitude of the British in the conflicts following the appearance of the new state, as well as the English and American books that put their stamp on the thinking and writing style of the future author are carefully recorded in the novel. The events and characters are seen sometimes through the eyes of the adult, sometimes through those of the child, with naivety, sympathy and (self-ironical) humour.

**Europe and England as Cultural Centres. European England vs. the Oppressor in Jerusalem. The Imaginary vs. the Real England and America**

For Amos's family, cultivated Jews coming from Vilna, which was at that time in Poland (his father), and Rovno, Ukraine (his mother), graduates in literature and Semitic philology (his father) or history and philosophy (his mother), reading in several languages (sixteen or seventeen – his father, seven or eight – his mother), Jerusalem is, culturally speaking, in the middle of nowhere. Culture is in Europe and culture is in Tel Aviv. Moreover, their neighbourhood is in a cultural wasteland, as the better off and more cultivated Jerusalemites live in Rehavia, not in Kerem Avraham. When they had to leave Vilna because things had got unbearable for them, the Klausners (his father and his parents) tried to get the necessary papers to immigrate to France, Switzerland, America, a Scandinavian country, England and even Germany. None of these countries wanted more Jews. Thus, in 1933, with their hearts broken, they came to Jerusalem. But still, both his mother and his father remained fascinated with Europe, the continent that had rejected them. "Now another subject which fascinated me during the writing of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and which is very much the subject of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* is the secret love, the unrequited love of my parents for Europe. They loved Europe. Europe never loved them back.", says the author in a public lecture (*Israel: Between Love and Darkness* 2007). As he notes in the novel, "Europe for them was a



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forbidden promised land, a yearned-for landscape of belfries and squares paved with ancient flagstones, of trams and bridges and church spires, remote villages, spa towns, forests, and snow-covered meadows." (Oz, 2005:1[1]), a land of words that charm the child who is familiar only with the tin roofs and dusty streets of his native town.

This fascination is exerted by England as well because, as Oz notes,

> On my parents' scale of values, the more Western something was, the more cultivated it was considered. For all that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were dear to their Russian souls, I suspect that Germany – despite Hitler – seemed to them more cultured than Russia or Poland, and France more so than Germany. England stood even higher on their scale than France. As for America, there they were not so sure: after all, it was a country where people shot at Indians, held up mail trains, chased gold, and hunted girls. (*ibidem*)

The part of Jerusalem where they would like to live is reminiscent of Europe. It has gardens and cultural events, well-furnished cafés, and tolerant, cultivated inhabitants who engage in civilized conversation.

> The Jerusalem my parents looked up to lay far from the area where we lived: it was in leafy Rehavia with its gardens and its strains of piano music, it was in three or four cafés with gilded chandeliers on the Jaffa Road or Ben Yehuda Street, in the halls of the YMCA or the King David Hotel, where culture-seeking Jews and Arabs mixed with cultivated Englishmen with perfect manners, where dreamy, long-necked ladies floated in evening dresses, on the arms of gentlemen in dark suits, where broad-minded Britons dined with cultured Jews or educated Arabs, where there were recitals, balls, literary evenings, *thés dansants*, and exquisite, artistic conversations. (*ibidem*)

An extension of that London known to him only from films and stories is for the child King George V Avenue in Jerusalem, a place of coffeehouses, ladies and gentlemen splendidly dressed, hundreds of lights, opera and ballet, gossips about artists' private lives, wealth, security, spacious apartments and servants, in short, comfortable lives. In utter contrast to Kerem Avraham and to the misery of their small, basement apartment, where they have to economize on electric light and sometimes to sell books (the only thing they have plenty of) to get food.

The idealized version of England and London known from books and films is contrasted with the impression made to them by the actual British living in Jerusalem and with the impact that the British rule has on their lives. In December 1917 the British army led by General Sir Edmund Allenby captured Jerusalem from the Ottomans and Britain became the ruler of Palestine (which had been part of the Ottoman Empire since 1516 and which also included present-day Israel and Jordan). The League of Nations, an international organization formed at the end of the First World War with the main purpose to maintain peace, appointed the mandatory power in the country in 1920. The Mandate was formalized in 1922, when the League of Nations Council ratified the text for the possession, and it was brought into effect in 1923. (*cf.* Miller, 2016)

The same England that is admired when it is part of Europe and its civilization is totally rejected when it is associated with oppression. Thus, Amos's father puts "his knowledge of English at the service of the underground" and contributes "an occasional illegal and inflammatory leaflet about 'perfidious Albion'." (Oz, *op. cit.* : 2), while the child himself fights against the British as well as he can, in his imagination or in his games. "I had often stormed into this camp [the British military base – our note],

[1] The number after the colon represents the chapter.



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conquered, subdued, and purged it, and raised the Hebrew flag over it in my games on the rush mat."(*ibidem* 7) He even builds a rocket with his friends, which he plans to aim at Buckingham Palace, though not at innocent people, and that fails to fulfil its mission due to technical problems and to the fact that it is made redundant by the end of the mandate.

> When I was little more than eight, in the last year of the British Mandate, a couple of fellow conspirators and I built an awesome rocket in the backyard of our house. Our plan was to aim it at Buckingham Palace […].
>
> I typed out on my father's typewriter a polite letter of ultimatum addressed to his Majesty King George VI of England of the House of Windsor (I wrote in Hebrew – he must have someone there who can translate for him): If you do not get out of our country in six months at the latest, our Day of Atonement will be Great Britain's Day of Reckoning. But our project never came to fruition because we were unable to develop the sophisticated guiding device (we planned to hit Buckingham Palace but not innocent English passersby) and because we had some problems devising a fuel that would take our rocket from the corner of Amos and Obadiah Streets in Kerem Avraham to a target in the middle of London. While we were still tied up in technological research and development, the English changed their minds and hurriedly left the country, and that is how London survived my national zeal and my deadly rocket, which was made up of bits of an abandoned refrigerator and the remains of an old bicycle. (*ibidem*)

The British are blamed not just for the curfew imposed on Jerusalem, for the power cuts or for deporting the survivors of Hitler's concentration camps to detention camps in Cyprus, but also for the death of the plants in the pots of the boy's neighbours. With painful irony he presents them as Tolstoyans who yearn for rural life and agricultural labour, but who are totally incapable of cultivating their own potted plants: "perhaps they killed them by overwatering, or perhaps they forgot to water them, or else it was the fault of the nasty British administration that put chlorine in our water." (*ibidem* 1)

The British presence in the area influences even the choice of a school for the young boy. The Klausners have to choose between a socialist and a religious school, but finally they give up both because in order to get to either the child has to go past the British barracks from which irritated or simply drunken soldiers shoot people at random or to cross streets where he risks being run over by hurried soldiers driving too fast. So, his parents send him to a small private school near their home.

At some point, Amos's father does get to live for five years in England, where he writes his doctoral thesis. But at that time his son is no longer by his side, having moved on kibbutz Hulda, and we are told next to nothing about "real" London and how Mr. Klausner manages there.

America, on the other hand, is known to the child first of all from the cinema and from the family stories. The American films he sees at the cinema offer him the image of an adventurous country inhabited by adventurous people who dig for gold, hold up mail trains and stampede herds of cattle. He also sees in these films that the best shooter gets the girl, though he does not know at that time what a man is supposed to do with such a prize. The family stories present his grandma Shlomit and grandpa Alexander as the only Jews who went to America and came back. Alexander fell in love with Shlomit when he was 17, and besides being too young, with no suitable education and no job, he was also much younger than her and her cousin. The whole family opposed the marriage, but as the young couple would not give up their love, their families joined together and bought them tickets for the ship to New York. The story



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goes that aboard the ship the future groom fell in love with somebody else, but Shlomit took him by the ear and dragged him to the New York rabbi, who married them. She never let go of his ear since then. But the truly amazing thing is that one or two years after this they paid for the return ticket. At a time when about two million Jews went *to* America and remained there, Amos's grandparents returned. And he never managed to make them tell him why. The only answers he got were that in America there were too many people, too many horses and red Indians.

**The United Kingdom, the United States and the Appearance of the State of Israel**

As the narration progresses and the British Mandate draws to a close, the relationship between the Jews and the British becomes more and more strained. With quotations from books and newspapers, but also relying on his memory, Oz manages to recreate the atmosphere, rumours, discussions from the period preceding and following the appearance of the new state. Amos is nine at the time. He is a well-read child, who devours books and newspapers, and is surrounded mostly by adults who like to teach him all sorts of things as they rely on him to fulfil their dreams. But he is a child nevertheless, a child who sees the world with candour, naivety and the limits of his age. He considers himself and is considered by his neighbours' children an expert orator, a strategist, and a political and military expert. Therefore, he frankly believes that if he had the chance to talk to the leaders of the important countries, he would be able to convince them all of the justness of the Jewish cause and claims. So, he spends his days in "conversations" with Downing Street, the White House, the Pope, Stalin and the Arab leaders. With the eyes of the adult Oz sees the child that he was as a chauvinist, a Pharisee, a hypocritical nationalist with his brain washed by his readings and by the education he had received.

In a factual manner the author presents to us the events that led to the birth of the state of Israel. But the dry facts are mixed with actual memories, fragments from conversations or impressions. Amos's childish ideas about things and the creative writer's language and winding sentences colour the story and make us live the events described. When the British governor announces the Britons' intention of ending their mandate, the United Nations Organization creates a Special Committee on Palestine to examine the situation in the area, as well as the situation of the displaced Jews living in European camps. On September 1, 1947 this Special Committee (UNSCOP) presents its recommendations to the General Assembly. They recommend that Palestine should be divided into two independent states, one for the Arabs and one for the Jews, with borders established according to the demographic distribution of the population, with a common economy, currency, etc., while Jerusalem should remain a neuter zone, with a governor appointed by the UNO. The Jews accept that, but the Arabs protest vehemently against the appearance of a Jewish state on their land. So terrible rumours begin to spread among people and fear starts haunting Jerusalem. Many of the rumours centre on the British, who are seen in the best of cases indifferent to the Jews, when they are not hostile and vengeful. Some say that the British government will withdraw its army to allow the soldiers of the members of the Arab League to conquer the region, to kill and chase the Jews away and then receive the English back. Others view this as an act of revenge of the British because the Jews attacked them while they were under British rule. Anyway, they all fear that the English will leave and will let the Arabs butcher them. Therefore, they no longer know whether they want to be free, but at the mercy of the Arabs, or under English rule, which also means under their protection.



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In this situation, their hope turns to the United States and to the help that country and President Truman might offer. But this help is not certain either. Rumours circulate about the Americans too, and the way in which they might be influenced against the Jewish cause by the huge oil companies with interests in the Arab countries.

On November 29, 1947, the General Assembly of the United Nations held at Lake Success, near New York, passes the two-state proposal, with the USA voting for it and the United Kingdom abstaining. Several months later, at midnight between 14 and 15 May 1948 the new state is born. But all the while between November 1947 and the beginning of 1949 the Jews are at war with the Arabs, both with those in the country and with those in the Arab countries surrounding them.

The attitude attributed to the British by the rumours mentioned above is confirmed by their actual behaviour throughout all this period. They are presented as taking the Arabs' side in the matter: promising protection to the Jews, but standing by and doing nothing while the latter are attacked and killed, even preventing the Haganah, the Jewish defence force, to intervene; having invited the Arabs to occupy the key points in the country before the Mandate officially ended; joining the Arab armies in the war.

**British and American Literature, and the Future Writer**

This however, does not influence the child's perception of their literature. Since early childhood, Amos is an avid reader. After finishing the books written in Hebrew found in his parents' library (as Hebrew was the only language they taught him for fear that knowledge of European languages would make him want to go to Europe where he would be killed) he discovers the public one. Both the librarian met in Jerusalem and the one he will meet later, on kibbutz, realize that Amos's passion is genuine and it needs nourishment. Therefore, they allow him to borrow more books than the rules of the library permit. And he reads not just Hebrew literature, but also world literature. Among the many authors that he mentions, we find English and American ones: Ernst Hemingway, Winston Churchill, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, James Fenimore Cooper or William Golding. The authors that he is not allowed to read are also mentioned and are American: Henry Miller and Norman Mailer. Their pornographic works are considered by the librarian inappropriate for him even after he gets married, to the librarian's daughter.

As a student at the Tachkemoni School he fascinates his colleagues with original stories built around well-known characters, like Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes or Karl May's cowboys. Later, when his mother falls ill, having terrible headaches and not being able to stand the light, he compares her to the crazy woman living in the attic in *Jane Eyre*.

But his beginnings as a writer and the finding of his writing voice are closely connected to American literature. He remembers that during his first years on kibbutz, he read several times Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, dreaming to become one day like the men presented there or at least capable of writing about such men – who know how to defend themselves from male enemies (with a gun, with their fists or with appropriate words and attitudes) and how to conquer women. And about women who are vulnerable and still untouchable, mysterious and granting their favours only to certain, chosen men. The books he reads and the films he sees induce him the idea that in order to be able to write valid works one needs to travel in the wide world and to live in a real place where things happen and where one goes through enriching experiences.



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Not on a kibbutz where there is nobody and nothing interesting to write about. And he finds himself in a vicious circle. If he wants to write like the writers he admires, first he has to go to London or Milan. And if he wants to go to London or Milan he has to be famous. How is he to do this? Not to mention that he considers he missed all real events in his country's history, all real wars, and he does not even live in Tel Aviv, the only Israeli city connected to the wide world, unlike Jerusalem where nothing happens.

The author who shows him how wrong he is to assume that is the American Sherwood Anderson. Reading his book *Winesburg, Ohio*, Amos has a revelation that makes him mad with joy. Because that book of stories is set in a single poor, provincial, God-forsaken place, full of insignificant people, who live ordinary lives assumed, by him, until then, not to belong to literature. This type of people he knows very well and he does not have to go to the end of the world to find them. They are the people on his kibbutz. To this day, Oz is grateful to Sherwood Anderson for having taught him that he can write about what is around him and that you do not have to go to what you consider to be the centre of the universe to be able to write, but you become the centre of the universe when you start writing. And also to this day he professes the idea that almost all great literature is provincial and universal, provincial because it presents a limited environment – a street, a neighbourhood, an apartment, a town – and universal because it addresses issues relevant to all people. (*cf.* Oz, 2017)

**England, America and the Initiation into Adulthood**

Last but not least, we should also mention that the young boy's initiation into adulthood, sexual or otherwise, is also marked by the British and American presence and culture. When Amos is six or seven years old, one of the Italians kept prisoners in the British barracks near his home shows him the photograph of a woman wearing only stockings and suspenders as a sign of gratitude because the boy had given him chewing gum. It is the first time Amos sees an almost naked woman and he gets terribly scared, running away crying. About two years later, he is refused admittance to a gang of children who go to play in the woods without him because he refuses to blow in a condom that had been used by a British soldier in the forest nearby. The children discuss about sexuality taking as examples the British soldiers that meet girls in the woods. Then, more years later, Walt Whitman's volume of poems *Leaves of Grass* is the book that he reads from to the first woman in his life when he goes to visit her alone for the first time.

**Conclusion**

In his lecture *Where My Stories Come From*, delivered at the School of History from Tel Aviv University in 2017, Oz says that storytelling is not so much about ideas and plots as it is about "imagining the Other, putting yourself inside the shoes or under the skin of other people". Even though here he does not place himself in the shoes of the English or Americans, as the focus of the book lies somewhere else, he does present the way in which the boy he was perceived the other nations. Whether this perception is based on reality or on hearsay and on his readings, hence on the imaginary, we can notice that, even though the British are considered much more cultivated and are more present in the country, it is the Americans that play a more vital role both in the history of Israel and in the personal history of the future writer.



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