**Abstract**

The present research offers a critical reading on the representations of mothers in Israeli cinema between 2000 and 2020. It focuses on a new type of representation in cinema: the “post-traumatic mother.” This representation challenges both the hegemonic representations of mothers in Israeli film prior to the 2000s, and the militaristic representations that are prevalent in contemporary Israeli cinema. Examining Israeli cinema from a feminist perspective and through the oppositional perspective offered in these films, namely that of the mothers, allows for a new understanding and subversive reading of the life experience in Israel. In particular, it illuminates the life experience of mothers in the shadow of ongoing racial, ethnic, and gendered oppression and in a context of increasing violence within and outside of the home. This article analyzes the vital connection between personal maternal experiences and their perceptions of oppressive socio-patriarchal mechanisms (nationalism, racism, exclusion) as a traumatic relationship.

In Israel, from the Yishuv era to the present day, motherhood has been attributed great importance. Many researchers from diverse disciplines have addressed the mother’s role and status in Israeli national discourse. The profusion of works in literature, theater, and the visual arts that have the figure of the mother at their center indicates that these images preoccupy the public consciousness. Nevertheless, and surprisingly, the centrality of mothers is not reflected in Israeli cinema created before the 2000s. Although in many films there is a mother character (or at least she is mentioned in the context of the protagonist's life), she is present-yet-absent. She remains in the background, always pushed to the margins. Her character is one-dimensional, lacking subjectivity; it is muted, without a substantial voice that influences the film’s plot development. In these films, the mother is portrayed as a “phantom in a lost land” to use the language of Kristeva (2006: 227). She is defined according to the needs of the “other” (her son or daughter), and her story is usually told from an external point of view, not in her own voice. This gap between the prevailing centrality of the mother figure in Israeli culture and her absence or marginalization in cinema prior to the 2000s serves as the starting point for this study. The central claim is that in the last two decades there has been a dramatic shift in portrayals of motherhood in Israeli cinema, both in documentaries and feature films. The woman-mother has changed from a lusterless, marginal character who humbly embodies her role, to a character central to the film’s plot and theme.

I identify two main explanations for the dramatic and unexpected flood of cinematic works in the 2000s that relate to themes of motherhood. First, there was a radical and significant raising of maternal voices in protest movements such as the “Four Mothers” (1997-2002), which began following the Israel Defense Forces’ prolonged occupation of the security zone in southern Lebanon (1985-2000) and the heavy price that Israelis paid for in the loss of loved ones. Second, Israeli cinema flourished following the enactment of the Cinema Law (1999), and the establishment in Israel of cable television companies (1990), commercial television channels (1993), and satellite television (1998), as well as the development of avenues of production that do not rely on institutionalized support.

These changes enabled a resurgence of women’s cinema in Israel. A new generation of female directors joined veteran female filmmakers seeking to define, through their films, new terms and options for representing women, and to discuss the burning issues and topics concerning women’s lives in Israel that had been excluded from the public agenda (Yosef, 2017). One of these issues was that of motherhood. According to Yosef (2017), these new female directors are creating complex structural analogies between private trauma and national trauma, and exposing the ongoing and chronic nature of racial, ethnic, and gender oppression in Israel. In this way, they are challenging the dominance of the military ethos in Israeli culture and the resultant prioritization of Israeli male trauma (following battle) over female trauma (following racism, rape, incest) (Yosef, 2017, p. 139). These maternal voices and perspectives enabled women, at the turn of the 21st century, to break through the boundaries set by men in the home, in the public sphere, and on the cinema screen, gradually changing the picture that had been dominant in the decades prior to this breakthrough. The new perspective that I offer here emerged primarily from women’s point of view, but also includes the views of several male directors whose work addresses the female and maternal experience in a way that goes beyond the conventional patterns of patriarchal/militaristic Israeli cinema in which the mother remains secondary to the plot.

This study focuses on two key questions. First, how is motherhood being presented in Israeli cinema in the 21st century? Second, what is the significance of the various representations of motherhood that have emerged in the 2000s, within the Israeli social and political context and in contrast to the prevailing militaristic discourse in Israeli cinema? To answer these questions, the study examines approximately fifty films made in Israel over the past twenty years that address issues related to the universal maternal experience and the unique, local Israeli maternal experience (as well as the Palestinian and Bedouin maternal experience). From this corpus, seven films were analyzed in depth: *Or* (Keren Yedaya, 2004), *Seeds of Summer* (Ilana Dayan and Gilad Tocatly, 2008), *The Slut* (Hagar Ben Asher, 2011), *Alice* (Dana Goldberg, 2012) *Maternity Leave* (Moran Ifergan, 2013), *Sand Storm* (Elite Zexer, 2016) and *Foxtrot* (Shmuel Maoz, 2017). Analysis of these films raises a discussion of three issues that concern Israeli society and are related to the issue of motherhood: bereavement, intersectionality, and maternal ambivalence. Various paradigms formulated by feminist research, post-colonial feminism, theoretical discourse on intersectionality, trauma discourse, and cinematic research on motherhood, provide a theoretical basis for the establishment and development of a new perspective, enabling an alternative analysis of Israeli cinema. This analysis considers how representations of mothers in these films portray the consequences of a routine of violence in Israeli society. It emphasizes issues in which collective post-trauma is prominent, such as appropriation of motherhood by nationalism, militarism, and religion; questions pertaining to bereavement; and positioning maternal identity in the shadow of violence; as well as issues in which this is less prominent, such as the mother's feelings of remorse, depression, and abandonment.

The first chapter focuses on the appropriation of motherhood by nationalism and militarism (the mechanism of 'nationalization'), representations of bereaved mothers, and how cinema portrays the consequences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the reality of ongoing violence in Israeli society. The second chapter looks at cinematic representations of the intersectionality of motherhood. It describes how ongoing and intersecting systems of oppression, discrimination, racism, and sexism, under the auspices of patriarchy and colonial power (the ‘racism’ mechanism), deprive mothers of their independence, authority, and freedom of choice, and perpetuate control by the man/father. At the heart of the third chapter is the maternal ambivalence that lurks beneath the surface of films dealing with bereavement and intersectionality. It examines films that present motherhood as an experience composed of multiple conflicting emotions and internal struggles between one’s desires and needs and social demands and expectations; struggles sometimes involve painful concessions and mental anguish. These films portray the policy of fertility and pro-natalist ideology embedded in Israeli society by hegemonic social forces and power mechanisms to which women are subject (the ‘exclusion’ mechanism), alongside opposition to this mechanism, as expressed through maternal ambivalence. The three issues of bereavement, marginalization, and ambivalence can be seen as chronological, in addition to intersecting or overlapping.

Examining the films through trauma discourse, emphasizing the local uniqueness of Israeli motherhood, leads to several insights. The first is recognition of the oppressive mechanisms of power exerted on women in 21st century Israel (militarism, nationalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, sexism, and pro-natalism) and their intersectionality. The second is how cinema presents the daily encounter with these power mechanisms as traumatic in nature. The third is an indication of the ways in which mothers boldly confront these mechanisms, undermine their validity, and create a new voice, a new time, and an alternative space. The courage of mothers to fight for their rights and the rights of their children, to challenge patriarchal control over motherhood and the myths underlying this control, which are continually reinforced, leads viewers of the films to examine the validity and meanings of the hegemonic ideological-nationalist-militant discourse in Israel.

Motherhood is not portrayed in the various films only as a status or role, but as a prism through which the diverse identities of women intersect, and in which the various systems of oppression exerted on them are reflected. The films formulate, each in its own way, a new, subversive language of opposition; a language written in “white ink,” which opposes the duplication of hegemonic patriarchal ethics. This language seeks to free women from the shackles of the "father tongue" and the ways they have become accustomed to envisioning themselves as "others." These films reveal reality from the point of view of those who had been required to watch from the side and be complicit. In these films, the women characters must demonstrate responsibility and agency in a society designed by men.

The conclusions regarding the diverse representations of Israeli mothers reflect the unique, local character of this figure, in the context of theoretical perspectives created in international and/or post-colonial cinema. The context of Israeli society, and therefore also of Israeli cinema, as a society that is still colonial and embroiled in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, raises questions about how to use post-colonial theory and how to decipher the intersectionality present in these films. Following this, the question of pro-natalism, which has its roots in Jewish history, reinforces the distinctive positioning of mothers in Israeli society, and therefore also in the cinematic works it has produced since the 2000s.

The issue of motherhood is indeed present in the public, political, social, and cultural discourse, as well as in international research in the fields of literature, psychoanalysis, feminism, and cinema. However, to the best of my knowledge, the discourse of motherhood has still been repressed in studies of Israeli cinema, especially regarding the discussion of motherhood during wartime. This topic has been hinted at in previous film research but, in my opinion, has not yet been given the proper attention. The present study, therefore, seeks to overcome these omissions.