**Chapter Four: The journey to the true self in *Elsewhere, Perhaps[[1]](#footnote-1)* and *A Perfect Peace:[[2]](#footnote-2)* A multi-dimensional perspective**

**4.a. To decipher the code of misery, fear, suffering, loneliness: *Elsewhere, Perhaps***

The central theme running throughout Oz’s works is people’s complex humanity. This humanity is expressed with a fervor that often leads to extreme actions and is grounded in a yearning to satisfy various passions and desires. Indeed, it is the primary basis of a person’s identity, as described by Freud in his discussions of the unconscious and by Peirce in his characterization of the states of awareness of firstness and secondness. Such complex humanity is distinctively structured in those of Oz’s writings in which he develops the plots of individual characters in the kibbutz (which, as is well known, was his place of residence for decades). The question at the center of the present chapter is how it is possible to express individualism within a framework such as a kibbutz, which embodies a commitment to values and very rigid policies that govern conduct in every aspect of life. The chapter focuses on the kibbutz community, which serves as a very clear test case of conflicts between the individual and a social framework. Yet, the question of how persons might express their true selves is relevant and important concerning any social framework. The methodological interpretation to be suggested here will be based on the works of Freud, Klein, and Winnicott, who described the nature of the relations between persons and objects in their environments and discussed the conflicts involved in the constitution of a “true self.” I will then present William James’s position, which suggests a complex perspective on aspects of the self, such that the social aspect is not extrinsic to, but is a constituent of, that self.

The kibbutz had a critical role in the settlement of Israel, especially up until the 1970s, at which time significant changes began to emerge both in the status of the kibbutz in Israeli society and the internal structure of most kibbutzim (privatization). The kibbutz also played a constitutive role in Oz’s biography: after the tragedy of his mother’s suicide several months before his bar-mitzva, Oz was sent to the kibbutz Hulda as an external child. Oz’s experiences were intermingled with feelings of alienation and loneliness[[3]](#footnote-3) but also with an acknowledgment and an appreciation for the structured environment of the kibbutz.[[4]](#footnote-4) Oz repeatedly pointed out this ambivalence, which did not dissolve even after his marriage to a member of the kibbutz, Nily. He dedicated several writings and essays to conveying his complex position regarding one’s ability to develop one’s individuality and express one’s true self in the strict social setting of the kibbutz. In his works, we find moments of extreme tension between the constellation of passions and desires of the characters and the set of ideals and values of the kibbutz. Oz chose the ‘high road’ in which the plots reflected the human complexity of life in the kibbutz so that the characters are usually not extreme from the get-go and are not dichotomously structured. Concurrently, the background of life within the kibbutz includes various magical and beautiful aspects (especially in personifying natural occurrences and in the deep connection between people and their physical environment) alongside oppressive and compulsive aspects (social pressure and direct and indirect sanctions against those who deviate from the path).

Throughout the two central novels that Oz wrote about life in the kibbutz, and which will be discussed here, *Elsewhere, Perhaps* and *A Perfect Peace*, the main characters reexamine and undermine the conventions of the kibbutz. Irrespective of the many differences between these novels, in both of them the characters eventually decide to return to kibbutz life and to contain the tensions between their individual wishes and the constraints placed upon them within the kibbutz setting.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is interesting to note that, in his essays, Oz defined the nature of the kibbutz as involving a “secret adaptability”:

“The secret of the survival of the kibbutz into a second and third and now a fourth generation, […] lies in its secret adaptability. […] The kibbutz likes to pretend that it is not adaptable but consistent, […] Which is true and at the same time false. It is true that there are some fundamental principles, […] that are absolutely non-negotiable. But there is a growing realistic recognition, especially in recent years, that not everything can be explained, that the world is not composed of pairs of problems and solutions that social order can join together in appropriate couples like a matchmaker. There are more problems in the world than solutions. […] In the nature of things there are more problems in the world than solutions. Conflict, generally speaking, is not resolved, it gradually subsides, or it doesn't, and you live with it.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

We can thus see a correlation between Oz’s extrinsic perspective in the essay and the process that the main characters in the two central novels undergo. In the essay, Oz conceptualizes the conflicts that emerged in the life of the kibbutz members as natural and universal modes of engagement: it is in the nature of certain conflicts that they dissipate, and of others that they remain unresolved. Human life is not a mathematical equation, and therefore there is no connection between the number of conflicts and the number of solutions. This can be seen as a possible interpretive key for the central conflicts in the novels.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Nonetheless, from an interdisciplinary perspective, we must ask whether the containment or dissolution of the conflict allows for an understanding of the price that an individual must pay within a setting such as the kibbutz. Ranen Omer-Sherman identifies a series of tensions in the novel *A Perfect Peace*: inner conflicts (tension between sanity and insanity, or a tension between a father and his son, which often occurs within the characters’ minds and is not necessarily outwardly expressed), and conflicts between the individual characters and political occurrences and phenomena that they did not necessarily participate in but are tormented by their results (for example, in the case of a kibbutz that was established upon the ruins of an Arab village, see Omer-Sherman’s discussion[[8]](#footnote-8)). In his works concerning kibbutz life, Oz articulates the price that the individual self must pay. To enrich the interpretation of these processes, we must examine which aspects of the self are satisfied and which aspects are harmed or ignored in the process of containment. Furthermore, to deepen our understanding of this choice, which receives no justification at all in the first novel and only a partial justification in the second, I will later present the psychoanalytic perspective and William James’s discussion of self-constitution as against society’s values and norms. First, we must clarify the focus suggested by Oz in his choice to describe the activities of individual human beings in the “pressure cooker” of kibbutz society:

“Nancy Hoffman: There has been controversy […] about *Elsewhere, Perhaps*. Someone said that it was an Israeli kibbutznik “Peyton Place.”

Amos Oz: Yes, I've read this. […] But what I was trying to do in my life and in *Elsewhere, Perhaps* is […] to penetrate beyond the hubristic famous façade of the kibbutz as a success story. To go beyond the movie image of the superman working the land all day, shooting infiltrators in the dark night, making love on the lawn as the sun rises. **I was trying somehow to decipher the code of misery, fear, suffering, loneliness** - in a society which thought it had, or pretended to have, a total solution to most human problems. Obviously, most kibbutzniks didn't like it. Not because they didn't believe it, but because they thought this story shouldn't be told.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

In the above-quoted interview, Oz emphasizes his motivation to extract the human components that characterized life in the kibbutz but, of necessity, were driven out and repressed. At this point, it is important to mention that though this tendency is alive in all of Oz’s writings, the tension between the characters’ desire to discover and realize their true self and the compulsions of society is especially pronounced in the context of the kibbutz in his writings.

**4.b. The alienation of the individual in *Elsewhere, Perhaps***

Oz’s first published novel was *Elsewhere, Perhaps* (1966). In it, Oz sharply describes the gulf between the self-image of kibbutz members and their actual conduct. As Yigal Schwartz notes, its importance was recognized only at a relatively late stage of scholarship:

“Amos Oz’s projection of the depth map of the Israeli fault line, which he refined in his first novel, *Elsewhere, Perhaps* (1966), has not received the attention it deserves.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Oz wrote several works in which he cast light on obscure aspects of the kibbutz-member stereotype, which supposedly embodied the ultimate Israeli: living a productive life, close to nature and nature-loving, having a passion for general education and a stable family life.[[11]](#footnote-11) Such a character can be found in each of Oz’s works that deals with kibbutz life. On the surface, we find a self-confident person with a moral ethos and a phenomenal capacity for self-control. In actuality, each of these characteristics disintegrates when tested against reality. In fact, the main character in each of the works experiences a growing alienation toward the values of the kibbutz and its members.

In *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, the main character, Reuven Harish, is a person at the end of his professional life, who was abandoned by his wife and raised his children. Reuven is, seemingly, a model of the working man and of the spiritual man, who took care of his two children with impressive reliability. Yet as the story develops, we discover that his daughter, Noga, is having an affair with Ezra Berger, a neighbor as old as her father. At the same time, Reuven was having an affair with Bronka, Ezra’s wife. The two families were thus entwined in a thicket of deception and concealment, both concerning their nuclear families and the other members of the kibbutz. Ivan Sanders argued that Oz was attracted to opposing characters, and it is for this reason that he chose to place Reuven Harish against Zacharia Berger (the unmarried brother of Ezra), who mocked Reuven’s naïve belief in ‘life according to accepted values’ (and similarly, Michael against Hanna Gonen in *My Michael*).[[12]](#footnote-12) This interpretation minimizes both Oz’s technique and his worldview and fails to expose the ambivalence within the minds of his characters. It appears that the conflicts are, first and foremost, within the characters themselves: Hanna Gonen is torn between her desire for a stable family life and her unrealized fantasies and passions. Reuven Harish also wrestled with the two paths that he was simultaneously on: the father figure who also functions as a mother and the figure of a friend-neighbor who cheats with a married woman.

Throughout the novel, one persistent question is especially salient, though it is not explicitly stated by the narrator (who narrates in first-person plural). Namely, how are we to explain the following paradox: on the one hand, the kibbutz is supposed to be an ideal way of life, and, on the other hand, every person or family to which the narrator attends is revealed as living a lie, or at least as concealing significant aspects of their lives from their loved ones and from other members of the kibbutz members.

We can see Oz’s choice of the first-person plural narration as somewhat ironic and didactic: the narrator seems to be explaining to the reader the life and conduct of people in the kibbutz and how they themselves perceive it, yet usage of the first-person implicates the narrator himself as one of the objects of criticism.[[13]](#footnote-13) These characteristics are already salient in the Hebrew title of the book “Makom Acher,” which means “A different place.” The title hints at the kibbutz founders’ pretense to establish a high-quality society that is different from anywhere else in the world and is based on principles of equality, austerity, and intensive work. In the novel’s blurb, the narrator mentions the name of the kibbutz “Metzudat Ram,” which means “A high castle.” The narrator “directs” the readers concerning the unique quality of the residents and emphasizes their supposed virtues in contrast with “regular people.”

Oz chose a more distant, third-person, narration in the second central novel (*A Perfect Peace*), in which he develops the character of an individual who confronts the demands of kibbutz society. This choice pertains to the central process of self-constitution in each of the novels to be discussed in this chapter. In the first novel, real self-constitution is almost impossible, it is contingent on social circumstances and other constraints. In contrast, in the novel *A Perfect Peace*, the possibility of real self-constitution is realized. In any case, we might say that in the two novels Oz explores the possibility of self-constitution as against the historical-social significance of the kibbutz as a form of life. Following Wittgenstein, we can say that in these literary works there is a conflict between the ‘surface grammar’ and the ‘deep grammar’ of life in the kibbutz. The kibbutz purported to be an ideal form of life, which would cultivate the ideal Israeli, and all the necessary words to achieve it have supposedly been spoken and written. Yet, as Oz describes it, such aspirations were dashed in the face of reality. Oz confronted the question of whether the kibbutz is indeed an ideal form of life also in his essay, though his attitude toward the kibbutz is much more forgiving and supportive in his essays than in his literary works. For example, in two essays dedicated to a retrospective examination of the kibbutz initiative, Oz describes the founders as people who have substituted religious fervor with the desire “to be attached to a single, great, final and decisive truth, that found detailed expression in innumerable rules and regulations, both great and small, in everyday life.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The central motivating idea and purpose of this desire were impressive and awe-inspiring:

“They were devotedly attached to an idea, the essence of which was a wonderful yet terrible straining towards a superhuman ‘purity.’ To leap free from the shackles of flesh and blood and to resemble gods or giants of yore. To set up in these bleak places communes of equal partners that would be not only a spearhead of the Zionist enterprise and the Jewish people but also the vanguard of a worldwide transformation, a reform of the world and the individual by means of a radical change in the conditions of life that appeared to be entirely natural and essential for human existence: property, competition, hierarchy, material rewards and punishments. All these were consigned to extinction, so that a new chapter could open.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Yet this desire and purpose met with challenges: the physical conditions were difficult (harsh climate, lack of resources and funding) and many people gave up and returned. Concurrently, those who remained also underwent changes that damaged the fabric of life in the kibbutz: people became tougher to overcome their detachment from home and the challenges that the country presented, internal tensions between people arose, and all were united in their disillusionment when vision confronted reality. In his essays, Oz compassionately described the complexities that the kibbutz founders confronted, though this compassion was peripheral to the plots in his literary works. Considering the appreciation he had for the kibbutz initiative, it is worth asking whether the difficulties and challenges that Oz described in his works emerged from the nature of kibbutz society or from the universal nature of human beings. The latter appears more probably in light of what Oz says in the interview quoted above. This can be compared to the works of David Maltz (1899-1981), who immigrated during the Third Aliyah and was one of the founders of the kibbutz Ein Harod.[[16]](#footnote-16) Maltz wrote several novels in which he expresses harsh criticism of the kibbutz collective, but his works did not receive significant attention. He focused on the loneliness of people on the sidelines in the kibbutz, whereas Oz focused on those who were considered to be the realizers of the ideals of kibbutz society.

Whereas Maltz expressed a sweeping criticism of the kibbutz, we can say that the picture portrayed by Oz is more complicated: we can distinguish between Oz’s attitude toward the kibbutz as a way of life, which is fundamentally positive, and the way in which the different characters in the kibbutz are shaped and how they deal with their many life-challenges, such as misery, fear, suffering, and loneliness. I wish to suggest that confrontation with these life challenges is not the result of life specifically in the kibbutz but an existential confrontation that every person deals with. Nonetheless, life in the kibbutz clarifies one’s confrontation with the question of “the true self” and the challenge of the constitution of individuality. Oz does not present a general criticism that casts doubt on the legitimacy of the very existence of the kibbutz initiative. Some of his criticisms are circumstantially grounded and some are universally grounded, that is: the human challenges kibbutz members confront are challenges that arise from tensions between people in every society. In a cohesive society, in which all members know and rely on each other, these challenges are more disturbing. Did the problems with kibbutz society emerge from ignoring the challenges and human needs that are common to everyone, like misery, fear, suffering, and loneliness, or from a conflict between the character of some specific person and the norms of kibbutz society? The novel raises an additional important question: how is a person acquainted with his true self? Is it a process of spiritual development or the result of certain circumstances and events that bring about reflection and self-discovery?

The characters in *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, raise various answers to these questions, which reflect Oz’s rich vacillations between individual and universal aspects of the self. Another important aspect of self-constitution in the novel is in the context of family relations. The kibbutz gave shape to a different family model that eliminated the loneliness of its founders, who were usually new immigrants who left their families in Europe and immigrated alone. Additionally, the shared accommodation of the children in the kibbutz allowed parents to work and raise their children in an egalitarian manner. Thus, a new family model emerged, whereby the family provides an anchor and a structure, on the one hand, and allows for freedom and independence on the other hand. Oz arrived at kibbutz Hulda alone, after his mother passed away (while his father started a new family). Apparently, the family model in the kibbutz was his greatest wish as a child. Yet in the novel, he exposes the pathologies inherent in this model. The plot focuses on the Harish family, and the main character is Reuven Harish: a poet, a teacher, and a renaissance man. The plot begins with his wife, Eva, leaving him and her two children and moving to live in Germany with a man who visited the kibbutz as a tourist. The narrator presents Eva as having a fiery imagination, and good taste, who was a perfect wife and had organized the classical music listeners’ club at the kibbutz up until she became ‘possessed’ and decided to leave her family and the country. Prima facie, the kibbutz ethos cannot accept such a transformation, yet toward the end of the novel it turns out that Eva tried to contact her daughter and tell her …

Up to this point, I have not mentioned the similarity between the starting point of this novel and Oz’s personal biography. In conversation (December 2017, close to a year before passing away), Amos Oz told me of his lifelong inability to reconcile with his mother’s choice to leave him. This had two consequences, according to Oz. The first consequence was pessimism about the possibility of being loved because even his mother decided to leave him. The second consequence was anger over his mother’s lack of credibility, given that she had always demanded that they should ‘leave a note’ when leaving the house, but chose to depart with no explanation and without any letter. As he says, the insult and anger he experienced paralyzed him so much that he did not speak of it with anyone until he wrote *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. In our conversation, Oz claimed (a claim that also appears in the novel) that it is only after reaching the age at which his mother committed suicide that he managed to take pity on her and comprehend her pain.

With this in mind, it is fascinating to see that already in his first novel what initiates the Harish family’s plot is the departure of Eva, the mother of the family. Eva also left suddenly, and she too could not be contacted. As mentioned, this novel was not considered highly significant in literary criticism, so, the theme of the mother’s sudden departure did not receive attention. Yet, retrospectively, it is to be expected that we recognize the similarity between this theme and Oz’s biography. Furthermore, the novel involves a certain process of absolution, which is revealed toward the end of the novel through a secondary character (Zacharia Berger), namely, that Eva wrote to her daughter throughout the years and tried to ask for her forgiveness and to express remorse and sadness about the harm she had caused. Oz shapes the biographical facts elegantly so that the mother leaves but does not die, she attempts contact but it is not renewed. I would like to connect this process of absolution to the seemingly pastoral ending of the novel in which the narrator directs the readers to think that all tensions were resolved and that a calm and tranquil atmosphere settled after the death of Reuven Harish and the marriage of Noga to a man who is not her baby’s father. In actuality, the narrator’s compulsiveness speaks of problems that were swept under the rug rather than resolved.

“You must listen to the rain. […] You must look only at the people who are here, inside the warm room. You must see clearly. Remove every impediment. Absorb the different voices of the large family. Summon your strength. Perhaps close your eyes. And try to give this the name of love.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

My claim is that James’s description of the self allows us to understand how human beings can silence certain aspects of the self and make others salient. In contrast, the psychoanalysts emphasize the cost of having an imbalance between the willingness to satisfy certain aspects of the self and to neglect others.

**Chapter 5: Living Meaningfully: Self-Creativity in *Black Box***

**5.a. Oz's linguistic creativity: An introduction**

“The earth may rise-up and fall on you; a star may drop down on you. Na! And so a blind wave of fervor boils up inside you and floods your soul, and you find yourself suddenly expecting an instantaneous illumination, a break in the clouds, something must, absolutely must reveal itself, a formula, a *dazzling* system, a purpose, surely it is inconceivable that you will go from birth to death without experiencing a single flash of illumination, without encountering a single ray of sharp light, without *something* happening, surely it is impossible that all your life you have been nothing more than a barren dream inside yourself, surely there is something, something must make itself known, there must be something.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

What is creativity? This passage from Amos Oz’s novella *Late Love* is a lyrical example of what can be referred to as “creativity”: emerging from an unknown source, a sense of illumination erupts in a person’s soul, of a sort never experienced in the past. The illumination is not broken down into small details but produces a sense of knowing something. In effect, creativity is expressed in the invention of a new movement, which, though individual, can be understood because it is formulated in language. Creativity is a frequent topic in literary criticism and psychoanalysis. It is the common denominator of poetry and therapy, both of which aspire to work a change, to establish something new in the psyche and the world. In practice, however, it is difficult to identify the lineaments of creativity, other than as evidence of an elusive internal experience that is hard to define.

**5.b. The** **epistolary novel as a creative genre**

The epistolary novel can be traced back to the end of the sixteenth century and remained a popular genre until the nineteenth century.[[19]](#footnote-19) The luster of this form declined as the novel with a third-person narrator gained increasing currency. Scholars of the past half century have been at odds about the genre. Some saw it as a decadent descendant of one branch of classical Greek prose,[[20]](#footnote-20) or as a genre in which the characters’ thoughts are presented without logical organization, in a sort of uncensored stream of consciousness.[[21]](#footnote-21) Others, such as Linda S. Kauffman and Joe Bray, praised the epistolary novel as a versatile genre that excels at reflecting and displaying characters’ thoughts and minds.[[22]](#footnote-22) Kauffman, for example, saw the absence of the conventions of personal writing as an expression of the flexibility that allows the author to reflect different historical eras, as well as a medley of conventions from multiple genres.[[23]](#footnote-23) Both Mikhail Bakhtin and Bray noted the influence of the epistolary novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the nineteenth-century novel.[[24]](#footnote-24) The analysis of *Black Box* here is inspired by the critics who stressed the advantages of the form.

Oz's epistolary novel *Black Box*[[25]](#footnote-25)was chosen for interpretation in the present chapter because it is an excellent example of self-creativity. All of its characters create a subjective reality in their letters, producing a frontal confrontation with the reality created by the other characters. Here creativity functions as a species of imagination, parallel to or in opposition to reality. Oz’s choice of the epistolary genre highlights the characters’ autonomy; they can develop their own style and vocabulary without being subject to the conventions of an external narrator. Their creativity is manifested not only in their personal pictures of reality but also in the decisions taken by each character, which cannot be observed by the other characters. Another sense of the characters’ creativity relates to the change in their selves: every one of them undergoes a significant change that also leads to a change in his or her relations with the other characters.

In addition, this novel, like every outstanding work of literature, brings readers into direct contact with the author’s creativity. The fact that the novel depicts the vicissitudes of love, with its failures and successes, returns us as readers to the romantic ideal of the artist’s capacity to offer its ultimate portrayal. The possibility of creativity is a fundamental element of romanticism and was also adopted by Rorty when he described the linguistic turn.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The romantic conception of creativity as well as the conception of creativity as self-change have not been discussed in the critical literature written about this novel so far. An analysis of the novel from a new perspective on creativity, inspired by Freud, Klein, Winnicott, and Peirce’s conception of abduction, suggests that we must first attend to the place of the novel within the entirety of Oz’s works and its criticism.

*Black Box* was published in Hebrew in 1987, and in English in 1988. The fact that it is an epistolary novel has several formal characteristics. The novel proceeds through the exchange of letters among the characters, without a narrator to provide an extrinsic perspective. Each of the characters uses a distinct form of discourse and includes everyday phrases with metaphorical expressions and imagery that are unique to the character.[[27]](#footnote-27) Furthermore, the letter exchange brings about intersecting relations between the characters, since each of the letters is addressed to one character but usually refers, whether directly or indirectly, to other characters as well. The novel’s thematic focus is the triadic relation between Ilana, Alexander Gideon – her ex-husband, and Michel Sommo – her current husband. Alexander is a history lecturer who specializes in the history of fanaticism and teaches at the Midwest University in Chicago. Ilana is married to Michel Sommo, a new immigrant from Algeria and a right-wing religious nationalist who is involved in buying Arab lands. Ilana and Alexander have a son, Boaz, and Ilana and Michel have a daughter, Yifat. Most of the novel is dedicated to exchanges among this triad, and the plot largely proceeds as a result of Ilana’s decisions. For example, the novel begins with Ilana asking Alexander for help because of trouble involving their son, Boaz, and Alexander agrees. From this point onward, the main characters develop a complex correspondence into which additional characters are integrated later on, Boaz – the son, Manfred Zakheim – Alexander’s lawyer, and Rahel – Ilana’s sister. Toward the end of the novel, Ilana decides to leave Michel, move in with Alexander, who has cancer and is on his deathbed, and take care of him. This decision, too, motivate the events described in the final set of letters in the novel.

The political tension in *Black Box* is built differently than in Oz’s other political writings, specifically as they pertain to criticisms of the labor movement (for example, *A Perfect Peace* or *A Tale of Love and Darkness*). The political ideas here do not serve as background for the plot but are embodied in the characters themselves. The two central male characters in the novel, Alexander and Michel, represent polar opposites, both in external appearance and in conduct, and the correspondence between them heightens these differences. This is so because each character creates a language-game of their own, which reflects their characteristics and differs markedly from the language-games of those with whom they correspond. The characteristics of each character (height, clothing, way of speaking) are directly related to their origins: Alexander is Ashkenazi in origin whereas Michel is of Mizrachi origin. Further, Alexander is secular and Michel is religious. Oz chose to frame the two central points of tension in Israeli society through the characters of Alexander and Michel. The result was acute from the point of view of literary critics in Israel.[[28]](#footnote-28)

A salient example of a comprehensive criticism of the novel can be found in Dror Mishani’s book. He viewed the novel as a “veil that conceals the ideological-political circumstance of the dissolution of national unity and harmony, which is the desired situation of Ashkenaziness that wishes to continue to establish itself as universal.”[[29]](#footnote-29) According to Mishani, the Republic of Letters attempted to free itself from the stain of racism by distancing itself from the novel, yet it was a fictitious distancing, and the racism outlined by the novel arose anew, in other forms, within Israeli reality. Mishani argued that the novel exemplifies the racism, even if its criticism attempted to correct the impression of disruption that is formed by the Mizrachi body described in the novel.[[30]](#footnote-30)

As summarized by Ruby Namdar, in an issue of the journal *Moznaim* that was dedicated to Amos Oz, the novel received overwhelmingly negative reviews (though its French translation received the prestigious Femina Etrangere prize).[[31]](#footnote-31) In an article titled “Is it Time to Take Out *Black Box* from the Blacklist?”, Namdar summarizes the alleged factors that led to the widespread criticism: “The central criticism that the novel received was for the “superficiality” or “stereotypical” portrayal of the characters – especially that of Michel Sommo. […] And, indeed, allegedly, but only allegedly, we have here a complete set of stereotypical characters that are supposed to represent the Jewish-Israeli society in all its variations and generations.”[[32]](#footnote-32) A criticism of the novel along these lines can be found in an article by Orna Ben-Naftali who called the novel “The Black-Box of Israeli Liberalism.” In her article, Ben-Naftali argues that the power relations within Israeli society are embodied in the novel in the mutual resentment between Michel Sommo and the ‘royalty from Binyamina’ (by which she means Alexander Gideon, as well as Ilana, Boaz, and Yifat, who moved into his house in Binyamina to take care of him toward the end of his life).[[33]](#footnote-33) She argues that, in the novel, Michel Sommo represents the political transformation that Israel experienced in 1977, which amounts to “a danger that threatens the Zionist dream.”[[34]](#footnote-34) This threat “must be removed,” rather than contained.[[35]](#footnote-35)

As against such criticism, Namdar, as well as Hannan Hever,[[36]](#footnote-36) suggested an alternative interpretation of the Mizrachi representation in the novel and, correspondingly, of the representation of the conflict between Ashkenazim and Mizrachim in Israeli society. Hever, who addressed Dror Mishani’s criticism extensively, attended to the claim that the novel was removed from the Republic of Letters by labeling it as racist. Hever did not deny the central criticism concerning the perpetuation of discrimination and ridicule of the Mizrachi that the character of Michel Sommo embodies. Yet, he argued that any representation, even if racist, is better than no representation. Appropriating the shaping of the Mizrachi character, even if done problematically, provides a platform for a Mizrachi voice, which was silenced in Hebrew literature until the end of the 1980s.

Namdar’s article considers the two central criticisms of the novel, stereotypical portrayal and Ashkenazi superiority that expresses racism, as fundamentally mistaken. He denies the claim that the characters are shaped stereotypically, and that the Ashkenazi hegemony is strengthened, by pointing out that Oz actually focused on shaping marginal characters: “Oz delivers to us one of those broken, dysfunctional, families. […] All the characters in the novel, including that of the rich professor and his successful lawyer, are marginal characters – obsessed and tormented characters who cannot find their place within Israeli reality that, according to the novel’s harsh critics, they are supposed to “represent” in such a flat and uninteresting way.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Two points can be raised in response. First, a rich professor and a shrewd lawyer are not marginal characters but well-established people with power and influence that are evident in the novel (with the help of his lawyer, Alexander manages to get his wife and son back). Second, marginal characters can also be portrayed stereotypically.

In addition to the literary argument about how well the characters are shaped (stereotypical or complex),[[38]](#footnote-38) Namdar thickens the literary distinction by presenting a claim with interesting sociological and psychological depth. Namdar claims that Michel’s character is actually complex rather than stereotypical, as besides being a wheeler-dealer, greedy, and outwardly unimpressive, he is also wise, warm, and forgiving. Namdar’s further claim is psychologically fascinating: Michel’s character is not an extreme version of reality, but precisely reflects how Israeli society perceives the Mizrachi. Additionally, Michel’s character reflects how Mizrachi people think they are perceived in Israeli society. According to Namdar, this double-sided mirror in the novel reflects a harsh, but actual, reality. Racism exists in Israeli society. It was not invented or intensified in Oz’s novel. Thus, Namdar suggests that we reevaluate the novel and identify its advantages, despite its marginal shortcomings.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Beyond the importance of discussing the significance of the novel within literary criticism in the cultural context of Israeli society, the present discussion aims to focus on a universal aspect of the novel’s plot within which the three main characters (Ilana, Alexander, and Michel) undergo a process of creative development. Even in the positive criticisms of the novel (which will be presented and discussed in more detail later on), this aspect has not yet been examined. Thus, the present discussion suggests extending the interpretive web and including in it also Peircean and psychoanalytic insights that will allow us to identify the self-creativity of the main characters in the novel.

In contrast with the literary critics in Israel, who were centrally concerned with the social power dynamics within the novel, the starting point for literary critics around the world was the novel’s originality in terms of the genre and the relations between form and content. Joshua M. Getz and Thomas O. Beebee point out an important fact about the relations between form and content: out of 49 letters, 13 were written by Ilana, and 17 are addressed to Alexander (who only wrote 7 letters).[[40]](#footnote-40) This fact reflects Alexander’s significance in the novel, not because of his origins or his professional-social status, but because of his meaningfulness in the lives of the other characters. Ilana love-hates him intensely, Michel argues and criticizes him, Boaz recoils from him but also accepts his help, and his lawyer argues with him but does as he is requested. Alexander’s power is also manifested in the phrases that the characters use to describe their relations to him. Scholars such as Avraham Balaban and Joseph Cohen have noted the poetic-linguistic originality afforded by the collection of letters, an originality that well exemplified the emotional turmoil between the characters.[[41]](#footnote-41)

A third aspect of the relations between form and content is the polyphonic character of the novel, which results from the lack of a narrator. In an interview with Clive Sinclair, Oz argued that the fact that the novel does not have a narrator provides the characters with a certain independence and allows readers to choose with whom to identify, without the influence of an authoritative external narrator. The novel, Oz claims, is polyphonic and does not betray a preference of one character over the other. Oz claimed that the politicization that was attributed to him was because when a novel is published in Israel, which includes a political affiliation of the character of the narrator, it is difficult to avoid thinking that the author himself expresses his own political position through it.[[42]](#footnote-42) These three aspects of the relations between form and content – the number of letters that were written by, and to, each character, the linguistic novelty and each character’s unique language-game, and the lack of a narrator, which allows for polyphony, reflect the possibilities that Oz realized when choosing to shape the plot in the form of an epistolary novel. Furthermore, I would argue that there is an additional significant aspect to this genre, which is the ability of each of the main characters to change dramatically. Organizing the plot in letters intensifies the relations between the characters because they are consistently interacting in a way that requires them or pushes them to respond. This drive to action is a central means of exercising self-creativity. Yet this claim requires support through a deeper analysis of the nature of self-creativity. The psychoanalytical and Peircean insights, which will be presented below, are motions toward such an investigation. Following the analysis, I will suggest a renewed interpretation of the novel.

**Epilogue: It is time to make peace**[[43]](#footnote-43)

The narrator’s last sentence in the chapter “Magnificent” of Oz’s book *The Same Sea*, epitomizes the level of acceptance that is required in attempting to summarize the journey through Oz’s writings. Each of the chapters aimed to interpret Oz’s works not only as literary masterpieces but as existential-philosophical expressions. The central idea was to show how, in his works, Oz reconceptualized psychological, personal, familial, and often national, processes in a way that allows readers to understand such processes in general life from a retrospective perspective. Wittgenstein’s suggestion that we should examine “words, significantly uttered,”[[44]](#footnote-44) was applied in this book, first and foremost, in the literary analysis, and later in two additional disciplinary paths: psychoanalysis and pragmatism. That is, Oz’s works have a deeper significance both for understanding the life of the mind and for understanding practical life. The methodological idea was to identify a central guiding principle that is developed within the work and then present Oz’s linguistic-literary distinctiveness. Thus, I have investigated central principles such as the symbolization of relations, the characters’ states of consciousness, self-constitution, guilt and betrayal, and creative processes that lead to change and absolution.

Alongside the literary formulation of these concepts and processes, I have discussed their psychoanalytic and pragmatic value, so as better to understand their literary roles. I have investigated the function of the different characters and plots from various disciplinary perspectives, both to show the richness of Oz’s works and, more so, to show their relevance to the everyday lives of their readers. The process of exposing the different aspects of Oz’s writings, which had a critical influence on Hebrew culture in the twentieth century, was an attempt of sorts to decipher the secret of its great allure. The book presented a variety of criticisms of Oz’s works, and Yigal Schwartz has already noted the bipolar attitude toward Oz and his works. Yet both those who criticize his writings and those who love them would be hard-pressed to deny their central place in twentieth-century literature. Not all of his writings received the same scholarly and media attention, and it is interesting to note that it is his most personal and intimate book, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, that achieved the status of a cult classic and best reflects the history of the State of Israel in its early days. By means of psychoanalytic and pragmatic concepts, I have attempted to examine how Oz managed to create a psychological language and a practical language that shaped personal and social events, not only in and of themselves but also universally. The distinctiveness of Oz’s writings lies, among other things, in its creation of the shared language of the very essence of Israel, while simultaneously being the language of the universal circumstances and challenges that people all over the world experience. Two years after the death of Amos Oz, his friend, the author David Grossman, commemorated him with the following words:

“We feel that we are touching some secret that lies at the foundations of Israeli existence. It is difficult to define this secret: it can be felt as a sort of constant quivering, in the mind, in consciousness, a quivering of ancient memory and of harsh traumas that have not yet been digested or truly understood. A neurotic quivering of profound existential insecurity that appears within us, Israelis, time and again, accompanied by some inner excitement and rash self-confidence. More than all, seems to me, this quivering is a sort of constant sobbing about the millennial humiliation for which there is no comforter, the humiliation of a persecuted and despised people that was almost wiped out. How troubling it is to read all this in a book. How difficult and exhausting to live this. These forces, these contradictions, are what make Amos’s books and characters, both the real and the fictional, so relevant even today; evidently, they will continue to be so for many years to come.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

1. Amos Oz, *Elsewhere, Perhaps* (*Makom Acher*, Tel-Aviv, Sifriat Po'alim, 1966),Trans.Nicholas De Lange, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Amos Oz, *A Perfect Peace,* (*Menucha Nechona,* Jerusalem: Keter, 1982), Trans. Hillel Halkin, New-York: Harcourt Brace pub., 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Oz’s retrospective discussion with Nurith Gertz, in the shared memoir: *What was Lost in Time* (Or-Yehuda: Dvir, 2020), p. 54 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “I look around and I see a social system that, for all its disadvantages, is the least bad, the least unkind, that I have seen anywhere. And I have seen a few, because I was born and grew up in Jerusalem, in different surroundings from those of the kibbutz people, and I have spent several periods of time in other places. The kibbutz is the only attempt in modern times to separate labour from material reward, and this attempt is, in Martin Buber's phrase, 'an exemplary non-failure'. In my opinion this is an accurate definition. The kibbutz is the only attempt to establish a collective society, without compulsion, without repression, and without bloodshed or brainwashing. It is also, in retrospect, a unique attempt, for better or for worse, to reconstruct or revive the extended family - that clan where brothers and nephews, grandmothers and aunts, in-laws, distant relations, relations of relations, all live close together - the loss of which may turn out to be the greatest loss in modern life” (Oz, The kibbutz at the present time, pp. 128-129). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Holtzman already identified the recurring theme running through Oz’s writings “of reconciliation and acceptance of reality, abandoning romantic dreams and lofty ambitions, and finding the meaning of life in what is given here and now” (Holtzman, *Loves of Zion*, p. 467)

However, whereas his interpretation is carried out within the realist domain, the interpretation suggested in the present discussion is based on the structure of the mind according to Peircean pragmatism and psychoanalysis, which provide keys to an understanding of acceptance of reality. The present interpretation does not rely on the worldview of the creator, Oz, but on a description of the universal processes of synergistic activities of components of the mind that bring about acceptance. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Amos Oz, “The Kibbutz at the Present Time,” in *Under This Blazing Light* (Be'or Hatchelet Ha'a'za; Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Po'alim, 1979), Trans. Nicholas de Lange, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995: 125-132, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is interesting to note that the short stories that describe characters in the kibbutz are often characterized by an unambiguous ending (for example, the death of the parachuter in “The Way of the Wind”). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Set between the winter of 1965 and the eve and aftermath of the 1967 War, *A Perfect Peace* is Oz’s far-reaching exploration of the dangerous ideological and political divide between kibbutz generations as experienced by the unhappy young Yonatan, for whom, smothered by the communal responsibilities and ego-suppressing nature of kibbutz life, madness begins to appear more enticing than sanity. Centering on the internal crisis of this young citizen-soldier, raised in a kibbutz situated near the ruins of Sheikh Dahr, a (fictional) Arab village destroyed during the 1948 War, the novel raises important questions about the room for genuine political awareness (as well as self-consciousness) in collective life.” (Ranen Omer-Sherman, *Imagining the Kibbutz: Visions of Utopia in Literature and Film,* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 2015), p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nancy Yanes Hoffman, "The Wizard of Oz", *Southwest Review,* 1984:69, No. 3: 286-302, p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Schwartz, Amos Oz: The Lighthouse, p. 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Beyond *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, we can include in this category also a few of the stories in the collection *Where the Jackals Howl* (1965), the novel *A Perfect Peace* (1982), and the stories in the collection *Between Friends* (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ivan Sanders, “Simple Elements and Violent Combinations: Reflections on the Fiction of Amos Oz.” *Judaism* 27.1 (1978): 96-102, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ivan Sanders defined the narrator in the novel as “prissy and self-righteous” (Ivan Sanders, "Simple Elements and Violent Combinations", p. 96), yet this description misses the fact that the narration is in in the first-person and, as such, reflects his self-perception as part of the kibbutz society rather than extrinsic to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Amos Oz, “Thoughts on the Kibbutz,” in *Under This Blazing Light,* pp. 119-124, p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Oz. ibid, pp. 122-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Shula Keshet, *The Internal Underground: The Beginning of the Kibbutz Novel* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame'uchad, 1995), pp. 212-258.

For the comparison between Maltz and Oz concerning their criticisms of the kibbutz, see Holtzman, *Loves of Zion*, p. 581. See also, Ami Cahana, *Changes in the Kibbutz: Literary-Philosophical Study* (Ph.D., Bar-Ilan University, 2010),pp. 23-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Oz, *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, p. 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Oz, “Late Love,” in *Unto Death,* pp. 92–93 [emphasis in the original]. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Joe Bray‏, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “The epistolary novel, despite the prestige of Richardson and Rousseau, was obviously a technical dead end” (Elaine Showalter, *The Evolution of the French Novel: 1641–1782* [Princeton: Princeton University Press 1972], 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bray‏, *The Epistolary Novel*, 28; Linda S. Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Kauffman, *Special Delivery*, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 396; Bray‏, *The Epistolary Novel*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Amos Oz, *Black Box,* trans. Nicholas de Lange (New York: Mariner Books, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “If we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found” (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], p. 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Joseph Cohen well described the poetic richness of the novel’s language so that it expresses an “ultimate exoticism”: “The ultimate exoticism of the novel is expressed in two ways. One is the verbal power invested lyrically in Ilana's role and dynamically in Alec's role. Nowhere has Oz written more brilliantly than in the exchanges of letters between these two. They are filled with dazzling similes and metaphors, with soaring prose poems of great beauty, detailing on the one hand the anguish of the human heart in Ilana's remarks, and, on the other hand, the cruelty of a proud and powerful man's extended wrath following his years of sexual humiliation. In the end, as they begin finally to understand one another, there is some softening, some tenderness.” (Joseph Cohen, Review: *Black Box* by Amos Oz, *Shofar* 7:2, 1989: 67-70, p. 69) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. As I will discuss later on, it is important to note that the novel was well received by American literary critics, including those of Israeli origin such as Avraham Balaban and Ruby Namdar. This is not the place to provide a sociological analysis of this phenomenon, but it is worth mentioning. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Dror Mashani*, The Ethnic Unconscious: The Emergence of 'Mizrahiut' in the Hebrew Literature of the Eighties* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 2006), (Hebrew), p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Mashani*, The Ethnic Unconscious,* p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ruby Namdar, "Is it Time to Take Out *Black Box* from the Blacklist?", *Moznaim*, 2019 (March), pp. 42-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Namdar, ibid, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ben-Naftali, ibid, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ben-Naftali, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ben-Naftali couches both central tensions represented in the novel – the tension between Ashkenazim and Mizrachim and between religious and secular Jews – in a wider “pathology,” which is the pathology of Arab-Jewish relations in Israel (ibid, 87). Such a claim goes beyond the limits of the current chapter. I only mention it to explain the context in which the criticism against the novel is leveled. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hannan Hever, “Between Appropriation and Subversion,” J*erusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature,* Vol XXII, 2008, pp. 589-592. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Namdar, “Is it Time to Take Out *Black Box* from the Blacklist?” p. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. “The character of Michel Sommo was the lightning rod through which was channeled the vast majority of harsh criticism against the novel. Critics accused Oz of racism, of stereotyping the ‘other,’ cultural appropriation […] and even of antisemitism.” (Namdar, ibid, p. 45) [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. “‘Black Box’ placed a mirror in front of its readers – a somewhat exaggerated mirror, admittedly, but not a bent one. Readers were horrified by the twisted portrait that was reflected to them by the mirror and chose to smash it to pieces. It is time to release this unique novel from its solitude, to return to read it with a more charitable eye, and to appreciate the literary qualities that it embodies in spite of certain of its flaws.” (Namdar, ibid, p. 47) [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Getz and Beebee compiled a list of the number of letters by each character: “Of the 49 letters forming the backbone of the novel, 13 are written by liana, 9 by Michel, 7 by Boaz, and 7 by Alex; on the other hand, 17 letters are addressed to Alex, 8 to liana, 8 to Michel, and 6 to Boaz” (“The Epistolary Politics of Amos Oz's Black Box,” *Prooftexts* 18:1, 1998: 45-65, p. 47). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See: Cohen, Review: *Black Box* by Amos Oz*.*; Avraham Balaban, "Amos Oz's Black Box "**,** [*Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*](https://www.persee.fr/collection/rbph) 70:3, 1992: 624-640. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. In an interview with Clive Sinclair, Oz mentioned the absence of the narrator in the novel as a proof of the novel's polyphonic nature (Clive Sinclair, “Amos Oz – Writing and politics,” *Jewish Quarterly,* 1988, 35:3, pp. 43-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Oz, *The Same Sea,* p.148. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §594. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. David Grossman, “It Wasn’t Easy for Him to be Amos Oz,” *Ha’aretz, Culture and Literature* supplement, Jan. 8, 2021 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)