Motherhood and Nationalism in Orly Castel-Blum’s *Dolly City*

**May every Jewish mother know that she has put her son under the care of commanders who are up to the task***. –*David Ben-Gurion

**It was impossible life, but I lived it nonetheless**. –Orly Castel-Bloom*, Dolly City[[1]](#footnote-1)*

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that the modern era created a certain type of collective – the national community – whose members’ connections with one another are based on neither personal acquaintance nor immediate and unmediated communication. This collective establishes its members’ sense of collective affinity on the basis of the constant act of imagination, and thus Anderson defines the nation as an imagined community. In order to explain how the national community imagines itself as a single collective entity, Anderson begins his book with a discussion of the tombs of unknown soldiers. These tombs, Anderson explains, which memorialize the soldier who sacrificed his life for his homeland, embody the principle of anonymity necessary for the act of imagining the nation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Anderson’s choice of this particular example illustrates the blindness to gender that afflicts many theories of nationalism. It reveals that the national community’s act of imagination – both within theories of nationalism and in actual national reality – is in fact founded on the imagination of a male subject (such as the aforementioned unknown soldier memorialized in the tomb), who constitutes both the object and sole initiator of the national project.

The gender blindness inherent to theories of nationalism and nationalist thought has become part of feminist critical discourse, especially since the 1980s.[[3]](#footnote-3) Feminist criticism redirected attention to the lack of gender equality in the roles allotted to men and women by nationalist discourse, as well as to the substantive differences in the way it depicts their respective contributions, and necessity, to the national project.[[4]](#footnote-4) The premise of feminist criticism relating to the problem of nationalism is that in much the same way that citizenship is not universal, but rather based on a generic male model, the national subject is fundamentally structured as masculine.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nationalism is conveyed by Western culture by way of masculine imagery, such as “blood brothers” and “brotherhood,” and it is perceived as being based on a status of citizen-subject – objective, rational, aggressive – which, in theory, only a man can hope to achieve. The patriarchal identification of national existence with the public, political sphere, and the depiction of this sphere as a masculine stronghold, have, throughout history, prevented women, identified with the private domestic sphere, from acting as central (and equally valuable) players in the national project.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is important to note that the lack of direct theoretical treatment of the role of women in the establishment of nationalism and nationhood does not mean that they are entirely absent from nationalist discourse. Yet the roles this discourse reserves for them remain, in large part, limited and stereotypical, reinforcing the patriarchal perception of femininity: brave conquerors’ lovers, rape victims taken as plunder during war, and mothers and daughters fervently awaiting their loved ones’ return from the field of battle or mourning their heroic deaths.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In light of the aforementioned, feminist criticism sought to gender the categories of nation and nationalism, as well as to the point out the way in which nationalist ideology, masculine at its core, dictates the role and function of the family unit. The gendering of nation and nationalism allowed feminist criticism to reveal the way in which the national project was based on depicting women in one of two ways: either as objects of desire identified with the nation-state itself (which was to be conquered, fought over, and yearned for), or as passive subjects serving as a means of reproduction, whose purpose was to birth useful citizens who would ensure the continuity and persistence of the nation.[[8]](#footnote-8) This latter role gave rise to the image of the “national mother,” which was based on the identification of women as mothers of the nation (by force or by convention), and relieved the individual woman, who was understood as being, above all else, obligated to the national collective to which she belonged, of the responsibility to determine when to have children, and in what number.[[9]](#footnote-9) As this implies, the national mythos is founded on the reciprocal transferal of patriarchal attributes and characteristics from woman, as mother, onto nation: the nation is described (and imagined) as a faithful and devoted mother, who loves her children, and as a source of comfort and refuge for her loyal citizens. Like a mother, the nation is perceived as nurturing, protective, and sustaining, while the pure and benevolent mother is perceived as the creator of the national body, giving birth to and fostering its future citizens and preserving its cultural values, its rites, and its customs.[[10]](#footnote-10) This suggests that the woman’s legitimate voice in the discourse of nationalism is that of the mother – fertile, faithful, devoted – and it is only this voice, meant to be heard in the private realm alone, that establishes the woman as a legitimate, apolitical participant in the national project.

The centrality of the military system in the framework of political life in the State of Israel adds an additional layer to the gendered division of nationalist discourse described above. The Zionist movement formulated its national project as a drama whose protagonist was the Jewish man, and aspired to transform the exilic Jew – effeminate, passive, impotent – to the national Jew, one who was masculine, powerful, active, and strong.[[11]](#footnote-11) Zionist discourse, by describing the renewed connection between the new Jew and his land in intimate terms of redeeming and taking possession of the soil, in fact maintained the gendered national division according to which the nation was a woman onto whom the national subject projected his masculine desires. To this should be added the mother’s role in anything concerning her son’s mandatory induction into the Israeli military: in the framework of Israeli nationalist discourse, the mother is required to be utterly devoted to the needs of her son (which are also the needs of the state) and allow him to develop his masculinity, which reaches its zenith upon induction into the military. And here the fundamental contradiction of the institution of motherhood in its Israeli context is exposed: the mother must function as a total, devoted mother (according to the patriarchal definition), to worry after her child and ensure he comes to no harm, while at the same time, she must also function as an obedient ideological subject and hand over her son to the military system through which he might sacrifice his life.

*Dolly City* (1992) is a dystopian novel by the Israeli author Orly Castel-Bloom, details the story of Dolly, a doctor who studied at the University of Kathmandu, who lives in the city with which she shares her name: Dolly City, “a fragmented city, a crosshatched city, one motherfucking city” (38).[[12]](#footnote-12) In Dolly City’s urban spaces, especially within those of her apartment, Dolly reports in first person on the experience of motherhood suddenly thrust upon her after finding a “blue, hungry baby” (14) in the backseat of a gravedigger for dogs she had murdered for abusing her dog’s body. Dolly subsequently becomes the baby’s mother, responsible for ensuring its wellbeing and, especially, for preparing it for the day on which it will have to leave Dolly City for induction into the military. The baby quickly becomes the subject of Dolly’s medical experiments, motivated by her eternal anxiety over its health. At the same time, beginning in the earliest days of her motherhood, Dolly has trouble resisting the urge to kill the child. The desire to kill the baby, to escape, to be rid of it, follows her even unto the novel’s closing lines.

In this essay, I intend to argue that one can see in Castel-Bloom’s novel a critical account of the paradoxicality and absence of possibility inherent to the Israeli experience of motherhood. Through the figure of Dolly, Castel-Bloom tells of the attempt to establish motherhood within the framework of patriarchal authority, and gives voice to the silenced and denied maternal experience that the institution of motherhood seeks to repress.[[13]](#footnote-13) The parodic aspect that defines the novel largely stems from Dolly’s erroneous and twisted interpretation of the expectations she is subject to as a mother by the patriarchal order. In literary-hermeneutical terms, one might say that not only does Dolly misinterpret these expectations, she reads too much into them – she fulfills them in an absurdly literal and exaggerated fashion, creating an obsessive, inconsistent, brutal, and chaotic kind of motherhood. This overuse of the syntax of patriarchal motherhood engenders a deconstructive movement that breaks down the mythos of motherhood and demonstrates that the attempt to be a complete patriarchal mother ultimately leads to madness.

At the same time, as I seek to demonstrate, the novel does not solely deal with giving voice to the violent, destructive, and anxious feelings that constitute part of the maternal experience, or with coming to terms with the divide between establishment, patriarchal motherhood and the personal experience thereof. The deconstruction the clichés of the general mythos of motherhood occurs in tandem with the deconstruction of those particular to Israeli motherhood, as well as with a parodic and critical presentation of the way the category of motherhood is structured in Israeli nationalist discourse. The character of Dolly subversively and provocatively responds to Israeli nationalist discourse’s division of gender roles, and the contradiction between the expectation that a mother should be concerned with her child’s wellbeing (and protect it), and the contradictory expectation that she offer her support when induction day arrives, constitutes a fundamental aspect of the experience of motherhood described in the novel. Therefore, it is not merely that the character of Dolly puts the many myths of the institution of motherhood to the test, revealing them as artificial constructs, but also that she pursues a systematic deconstruction of the Zionist ethos that sustain Israeli nationalist discourse, exposing the ideological mechanisms that keep it functioning.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**The Space of Maternal Identity – the Struggle for Individuation and National Continuity**

The tradition of Western psychological thought assumes that the child’s ability to participate in culture is based on the dynamic activity of the father, which serves to liberate the child from the all-consuming, and fatal, grip of the mother. Psychoanalysis holds that without suitable detachment from the mother, achieved through paternal support, the child will remain in a psychotic world, bereft of discernment and reason, unable to acquire language, to communicate with the world, and, crucially, to establish himself as a subject.[[15]](#footnote-15) Beyond the depiction of the father as the central figure in the acculturation of the child and the construction of his identity, psychoanalysis establishes the processes by which an infant separates from the mother – differentiation and individuation – from the perspective of the child itself. In other words, the drama of separation, the essential stage in which the infant distinguishes itself from its mother, is one whose protagonist is the child. Psychoanalysis adopts the child’s perspective and celebrates its success in attaining the ability to identify the mother’s otherness and put an end to the sense of existing in a continuum with her body.[[16]](#footnote-16) While the child’s main task is to free himself from the symbiotic relationship with the mother, the cultural demand made of the mother is to create a space of non-differentiation between her own needs and those of her child. While the child’s “natural” movement is in the direction of separation, the mother must aspire to the reverse: she will be deemed a good, benevolent mother only if she succeeds in assimilating the child’s needs within herself, placing him at the very center of her identity and putting all her physical and emotional resources at his disposal.

In the framework of the novel, Castel-Bloom makes a fundamental change to the structure of the aforementioned relationship between mother and child, and casts Dolly (the mother) herself as the protagonist of the drama of separation, as the one who considers the possibility of distinguishing and differentiating herself from her child.[[17]](#footnote-17) The novel describes this drama as the mother’s territorial struggle for her own identity – a struggle defined by a constant negotiation between maternal identity and the child entity occupying her space. Dolly vacillates between an effort to obey the cultural demand to wholly give herself over to raising her child and the need to defend against its invasion of her personal realm. The sense of spatial violation, which stems from the oppressive expectation that a good mother sacrifices and nullifies herself in favor of her child, is expressed through the changes that take place in Dolly’s apartment. The apartment, as a kind of metonym for Dolly’s identity, psyche, and body, becomes, once the child enters it, a space undergoing a process of internal colonization, and the changes Dolly makes to the space are analogous to her own attempt to heed the cultural demand made of mothers, while simultaneously defending the borders of her own distinct identity.

Dolly’s description of her apartment before the arrival of the invading child demonstrates the wide, immeasurable, and unquantifiable limits of the space of identity:

“When I bought this apartment, the previous occupant told me that it had been designed by a Bedouin architect, who had lived in it years before and who'd possessed a tremendous sense of space. I don’t know the exact measurement in meters, maybe it's a more like a kilometer, but it's three hundred square meters at least” (35).

The child’s arrival in this space immediately exerts an influence on its organization – its internal divisions and its borders. Dolly feels compelled to create a clear boundary between inside and out – to limn the boundaries of the space of her identity in an effort to respond to the cultural demand instructing the mother to offer up this space as a protective and fertile arena for the child’s development:

"I shut the windows, pulled down the blinds, and drew the curtains." (20)

"I called a welder and ordered bars. I said to myself, with children it's no joke, you don’t take risks. […]. The welder and I went from room to room, balcony to balcony, window to window. I even asked him to bar the holes in the bath and the basin. I don’t want any trouble, I told him, you might as well put little bars on the taps too. […]. By midnight the whole house was barred. I stood on the balcony and breathed. The air was still, and the tops of the soft towers, which usually swayed in the wind, were stiff and erect as masts. The bars were ruining the view, without which my life wasn’t worth living. Shivers ran down my spine, my forehead was as cold as steel. I made up my mind that first thing in the morning I'd call in a welder to get rid of all these bars. They were driving me crazy, and if I was afraid that in a moment of stupefaction I might toss the child out of the window—well, there were only two possibilities, either I would or I wouldn’t. The fact that there were only two options available, and that the possibilities weren’t endless, gave me a brief feeling of confidence. Confidence in what, I don’t know." (33-34)

The delimitation of the apartment with bars symbolizes Dolly’s efforts to keep the child safe, and as the novel makes clear, this protection is, first and foremost, a circumscription and constriction of the space of identity. Inherent to the act of installing bars is the assumption that if the mother fails to appropriately delimit her identity or define her body as a space subject to her child, she will endanger, and even harm, the child. Dolly’s comments express the difficult and ambivalent feelings of a mother forced to install bars that delimit both her physical space and the bounds of her identity; indeed, it is not only that the bars ruin the desired view from the apartment and impinge on Dolly’s sense of space and freedom, but also that they reveal themselves as a means by which the mother protects the child from both herself and the difficult feelings of someone forced to accommodate an unwanted invader. There is a clear paradox here: protecting the child means limiting freedom, but to preserve freedom (that is, to expel the invader) would be to put the child in existential danger, and thus, Dolly is swept into a constant struggle between contradictory interests in which any choice of a side is harmful.

The movement embodied by Dolly, between self-restraint and total surrender to the maternal role and the attempt to reject the child invader, expresses itself not only through the creation of a defining external boundary line, but also through the abandonment of internal portions of her identity. Dolly, who zealously presents herself as a doctor throughout the novel, and takes pride in her various experiments in disease treatment, is forced upon the child’s arrival in her apartment to shut down her laboratory, in which she stores samples of a great many diseases “supposed by many to be extinct” (24):

"I poured disinfectant over my hands and scrubbed them for half an hour, **until my skin puckered and began to peel and my fingerprints were almost rubbed out**. Then I filled a bathtub with an antiseptic solution and sat in it for an hour and a half considering what to do with the laboratory. Should I set it on fire? Should I employ a lab assistant to operate it and give her instructions from a safe distance? Or perhaps I should lock it up, and let nature take its course. While I sat trembling and twitching between these alternatives, the terrible fear of my son's possible premature demise continued to mount, until I found myself standing over him and watching him breathe, for fear that he might suddenly be snatched from me by crib death. […]. **A voice kept calling out inside me: Destroy the laboratory, bury your sinister career for the sake of the infant's bright tomorrows. Burn it down, for the sake of the next generation**." (24-25; emphasis mine)

As becomes clear, disinfecting the apartment and turning it into a space safe for a child is a process of identity loss, causing Dolly to lose her fingerprints and her distinguishing characteristics – her intellectual desires and her (“masculine”) activity as a doctor and researcher. Her peeling skin represents not only the demand that she alter her habits and act in a manner perceived as controlled and responsible, but also that she remove the physical barriers separating her from the child in order to allow symbiotic continuity to develop between them.

The necessity of sharing a single existential space with the child, and the changes this necessity demands to the structure of the identity and the self, inspire in Dolly a profusion of contradictory feelings – feelings that the prevailing culture identifies as illegitimate and bars mothers from expressing:

"[…] I picked up my son and rocked him to and fro to calm him down. I sung him various songs as we **approached the balcony railing**. Sometimes, even in Dolly City, I feel like a **stranger**. I look at the traffic jams, I listen to the ding-dong of the big clock tower, the gong of the Chinese restaurant, but in spite of it all I begin to tremble, **I want to go home—even though this is my home**." (32-33; emphasis mine)

"I looked down at the trash heaps, the carcasses, the distant ships, and I felt dizzy. **For a moment I was close to tossing the baby out**. Ten times over I rechecked that I was still holding him, moving back before I did something I'd be sorry for later. It was the same lousy trap. The mere fact that it was theoretically possible for me to throw him off the balcony was enough to give me the heebie-jeebies—as if I'd already done it." (33; emphasis mine)

These quotations demonstrate that motherhood inspires a feeling of alienation in Dolly, a loss of the capacity for self-familiarity, and even murderous impulses towards her child.[[18]](#footnote-18) Her familiar apartment, for her, becomes an abode of what Freud called the uncanny – the strange, the frightening, the alienated. While Freud argued that the feminine body, which embodies the experience of castration, is the origin of the experience of the uncanny, Dolly proves the opposite: it is the male baby (with his phallus) who invades her apartment; it is he who sparks the feeling of internal alienation that threatens the space of her identity and body.[[19]](#footnote-19) Through her negotiation of the boundaries of her identity, and in an effort to stand up and rebel against the annihilation of the “I” demanded by the child invader, Dolly undergoes a liminal experience and considers the possibility of driving the invader from her space. Dolly’s yearning to eject the invader from within herself, outside the space of the “I,” presents the child as abjected;[[20]](#footnote-20) that is, an entity experienced as an inseparable part of her, yet at the same time, one she cannot help but want to reject and expel from within herself. The duality displayed by Dolly in relation to the child – the simultaneous intimate maternal connection to it and feeling of alienation from it – thus fits Julia Kristeva’s definition of abjection: Dolly experiences the child as a liminal entity that negates her separate, coherent selfhood, an entity that Dolly must expel from within herself in order to be who she truly is. In other words, Dolly attempts to signify the child as Other, and considers the possibility of removing it from the bounds of her body and identity, yet at the same time, identifies it as her own, as a part of her, and strives to include it. This is, then, another example of the way in which Castel-Bloom creates a narrative that exchanges the roles of mother and child: she relates the story of a rejected and despised existence from the point of view of the mother, who vacillates between a desire to expel the child from her space and an acknowledgment of the psychic-cultural impossibility of doing just that.

The relationship between Dolly and the eponymous urban space in which she operates is depicted by the novel as one of continuity. The reflection of Dolly’s name by that of the city in which she lives (Dolly City) leads to the possibility of seeing Dolly and Dolly City as analogous entities, part of a single and uninterruptable sequence.[[21]](#footnote-21) This sequentiality and continuity embody the ideological relationship established by nationalist discourse between the political-collective entity and the maternal-individual entity, and the way in which motherhood is nationalized and used as a tool by the state. This “natural” sequentiality, established between mother and nation by nationalist discourse, expresses the appropriation of motherhood from the woman’s domain in favor of its accentuation in the public domain ruled by men – and, especially, it constitutes a means of obscuring these domains’ contradictory interests. This continuity allows the military induction of the son to be presented as a smooth and simple transition from the bosom of the individual mother to that of the collective mother – the nation – and grants legitimacy to the son’s sacrifice.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The novel presents the continuity between individual mother and collective mother constructed by nationalist discourse in Israel as arbitrary and violent, exposing it as a mechanism intended to conceal the irrationality and absence of authority presiding over the military system. If the continuity woven between the individual and collective mother is based on the existence of an analogous relationship between the two, one in which they cast each other in a positive light and are represented as inclusive, protective, and beneficial entities, then the analogy woven by the novel between Dolly and Dolly City is based on violence, arbitrariness, and alienation: on the one hand there is Dolly, a disturbed and violent mother, and on the other, Dolly City, a nightmarish, rationality-defying urban space. These two “mothers” are depicted as anarchistic, unrestrained, abusive, neglectful, or excessively smothering. Thus, the novel turns the analogy between mother and nation into a forceful indictment of the relationship between the nation and its citizens, for Dolly, like the nation, fashions for her son a reality in which he is vulnerable and exposed to unending violence.

Like the nation, Dolly, who keeps close to her son via a procession of operations and physical examinations, represents an entity which violates its citizen’s privacy and supervises them in a violent and abusive manner. The obsession with which Dolly examines her son – invading his body with a scalpel, verifying his routine development, hoping to fix him – is an analogy for the various forms of force exerted by the nation on the citizen-subject. Through the medical procedures she practices, Dolly represents the way in which the state subjects its citizens (via a wide variety of operations, discursive practices, and methods of oversight) to practices of normalization and regularization, turning them (through the guise of health, judicial, legal, and educational institutions) into subjects of research, observation, examination, and analysis.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Dolly discovers her son in a garbage bag: “wrapped in Health Department diapers lay a blue, hungry baby” (14). The logo of a governmental body – the Health Department – on the child’s diaper shows how the state signifies its citizens, from the very moment of birth, as subjects under state authority. Moreover, Dolly concludes that the wound she notices on the child’s stomach is a bullet hole (15). The physical proximity of the bullet wound to the umbilical cord symbolically binds the demand for the nationalization of the child’s body, future soldier that he is, and the demand that he be separated from his mother. The soldier’s potential for a bullet wound – which constitutes, in the framework of the ethos of homeland defense, something positive and heroic – is therefore bound up in the mother’s symbolic ability to sever the umbilical cord and deliver her son from her possession to that of the state. Furthermore, lying alone in a Health Department diaper with a bullet-like wound in his stomach, like a soldier shot in uniform, the baby is depicted as abandoned, bereft of parental protection, left in the clutches of a violent adoptive mother. Inherent to this depiction is the novel’s critique of the absent maternal protection the state purports to offer its children: the collective mother (represented by the Health Department diaper) is unconcerned with the health and physical wellbeing of the child, instead becoming another in a sequence of problematic mothers: one biological, who cast off and abandoned it, and one adoptive (Dolly), who subjects it to her own unruly and aggressive version of maternal protection.

**Impossible Motherhood: Institutionalized Motherhood and the Paradoxes of the Maternal Experience**

For Dolly, motherhood reveals itself to be a state of constant anxiety over the child’s wellbeing, and it is the very attempt to accede to the entirety of cultural demands and become a total mother that exposes these demands’ oppressively paradoxical nature. The character of Dolly demonstrates that the two options given by patriarchal culture to women – to be a good mother, or a bad mother – are neither opposite poles nor dichotomous categories. The novel presents these two maternal possibilities as causatively linked. The attempt to fully identify with the institution of motherhood and accede to its demands leads to the worst result the selfsame institution could possibly imagine: a mother so good and devoted that she becomes destructive, predatory, and cruel. For this reason, Dolly’s motherhood is constantly depicted through heterogeneity and ambivalence – she vitalizes and vitiates, nurtures and harms, cares and abandons. The routine series of surgeries and immunizations Dolly describes serve as ample testimony:

"[...] I, as a mother, had to fight against all these troubles, I had to protect this child against countless evil afflictions and natural disasters. I had to keep him safe, keep the lightning and thunder from striking him and the earth from swallowing him up. I declared war to the bitter end: Dolly against the rest of the world. It was as if I said to God that if this child was my responsibility – then he was *my* responsibility. I didn't want favors from anyone, including His Holiness, I didn't want anyone else to do the job for me." (22)

"But even though the child was a hundred percent healthy, I decided to cut him open. I succumbed to the chronic doubt from which I suffer. I wanted to check and see with my own eyes that everything was really in order, and then to check up my checkup, and then to make sure that there hadn't been any slip-ups in the re-examination, and so on and so forth." (31)

"My concern for his health knew no bounds. It was voracious, it was grotesque. In the middle of an operation on his leg I would discover problems in the groin. So I would close up the place I'd opened, and open the place that was still closed, and so on and so forth, for hours on end. Until it reached a stage when every inch of his body was open. And then I would pass out." (57)

By all appearances, Dolly is an abusive mother, wielding her scalpel in an unethical, unprofessional, immoral, and cruel manner. Yet at the same time, one can view her activities as an attempt to realize the ideal of maternal sensitivity to the child’s heart and soul, and the obligation to foster a connection without barriers. It is this very thing, in fact, that allows her to be “”.

This extreme enactment of the cultural definition of motherhood exposes its performative nature and challenges the determination of maternal sentiment as a natural and biological instinct.[[24]](#footnote-24) After an intensive reading of “the most up-to-date medical encyclopedia about children’s diseases and their treatment” (21), Dolly decides to immunize her child against as many diseases as she can:

"First of all, I decided, I would inoculate the child against as many diseases as possible. I ran outside to buy vaccines against tetanus, whooping cough, diphtheria, polio, measles, jaundice, scarlet fever, small pox, influenza, etc., and I gave them to him all at once—although I knew you shouldn't do this. I couldn't stop myself, I couldn't control my maternal instinct. The child reacted immediately with a high fever and convulsions." (22)

Dolly, who bases her decisions and maternal behavior on what she reads in an encyclopedia, an external source of knowledge, proves that motherhood is akin to a set of operating instructions, or a series of scripts to be learned and memorized. By way of the surgeries and immunizations she carries out on her son, she apparently signifies her concerned, anxious maternal attitude towards him. This signification, so to speak, is meant to create the effect of an internal maternal nucleus; a testament to the natural and spontaneous impulse towards maternal love.[[25]](#footnote-25) Yet in practice, Dolly’s maternal signification exposes the constructed and artificial dimension of motherhood: her repeated rituals – the immunizations, the surgeries, the stringent oversight of her son’s health and haleness of body – fail to permanently establish her maternal identity. Dolly exposes the fundamentally imitative structure of motherhood by engaging in a failed act of maternal imitation, in which gestures meant to be understood as maternal (concern, devoted care, sustenance, protection) are performed in a grotesque, excessive, and cruel fashion. Moreover, precisely because Dolly is characterized as someone who assumes masculine gender characteristics and signifiers (a doctor who acts with cold consideration, possesses a pronounced libido, and behaves aggressively and violently), her maternal performance undermines the self-evident connection between parenthood and gender. In other words, the representation of Dolly as someone who takes on behaviors and characteristics culturally interpreted as masculine shatters the expected accordance between femininity and motherhood, and proves that motherhood, much like femininity, is an acquired, imitative practice, rather than the result of an internal essence. The representation of her irrational and cruel actions as an expression of a maternal instinct imparts a parodic tone to Dolly’s theater of motherhood; not only does her association of maternal instinct with uncontrollable violence subvert existing norms, her use of this phraseology exposes the ideological mechanism that seeks to ascribe some natural essence to external gestures and behaviors.

Throughout the novel, Dolly translates the paradoxes of maternal identity into the physical realm, granting them physical-material expression. The child’s spatial and bodily invasion of maternal space finds tangible expression in Dolly’s attachment of the child to her back:

"**I went to an old carpenter and asked him to glue the child to my back**. First of all, I wouldn’t see him, and because of the layer of glue I wouldn’t actually touch him either. Secondly, he would grow on my back, and gradually he would become part of me, and I would become part of him, and then, when **the barriers between us broke down completely**, I would be able to **incorporate** **him inside myself** and forget all about him, and I wouldn’t have to worry so much anymore. As for the particularly aesthetic hump, I didn’t give a damn, **I knew that anyone who wanted would take me as I was, and if my hump bothered him—let him go fuck somebody else**." (79; emphasis mine)

This description of gluing the child to the back, something of an inverted pregnancy, constitutes a physical embodiment of the total devotion patriarchal society expects of a mother. By gluing her child to her back, Dolly puts her total obligation to her son on display and actualizes the expectation of a close symbiotic bond between mother and child. In other words, by transforming the child into part of her body, she imparts an aspect of tangibility to the idea of the good, devoted mother, ready to sacrifice her freedom and her body for the sake of her child. But this concretization of the maternal ideal reveals the violent and impossible aspects inherent to the cultural expectation of total motherhood, as these expectations transform the mother’s body into something twisted and grotesque, an invaded space stripped of any distinct identity. The reference to the carpenter and bearing the child on the back constitutes an intertextual allusion to the figure of Jesus, who bears his cross on his back along the Via Dolorosa.[[26]](#footnote-26) One can see in this an example of the way Castel-Bloom reorganizes the system of connotations and narratives patriarchal culture assigns to motherhood. By identifying Dolly with Jesus, rather than with the holy mother,[[27]](#footnote-27) Castel-Bloom reencodes the meaning of motherhood and represents it as an ongoing march down its own Via Dolorosa, an unbearable burden weighing down the back. The act of gluing the child to the mother’s back shows how Castel-Bloom chips away at the cultural-patriarchal effort to repress the physical, material experience of motherhood and birth. Gluing the child to the back bears witness to the fact that pregnancy and motherhood are based on breaching the body of the individual (the masculine individual, as defined by culture); on the redoubling of the female body and its transformation into a heterogeneous locus that denies Western cultural and philosophical precepts, which define the body as single, coherent, and monolithic.[[28]](#footnote-28) Finally, in her statement’s concluding words, Dolly refers to maternal sexuality, and in so doing subverts the dichotomous patriarchal conception of the woman, which denies the possibility of motherhood and sexuality’s coexistence.

**The Struggle Against the Symbolic Order and the Nationalist Ethos**

Dolly’s spatial struggle for existence against her son is paralleled by an additional struggle she wages against the masculine symbolic order, which is responsible for the oppressive definition of motherhood and the formulation of the mother’s status as subject, and claims ownership of her and her son’s lives. Castel-Bloom describes Dolly’s struggle against the symbolic order as equivalent to the struggle against the nationalist ethos: “Pan-T,” the name of the national airline in the novel, is the workplace of Dolly’s son’s grandfather, and even though he is not a significant presence in the novel, the fact of his existence constitutes the potential for a struggle over Dolly’s possession of the child. Furthermore, it is the Pan-T company that finances the “circumcision” and “bar mitzvah,” the rites of the child’s socialization and induction into the Jewish social order, and it is under its auspices that the child is inducted into the military network (“The Academy of Brutal Semanship,” 124). Pan-T, which rules over the child’s normative course of existence, competes with Dolly over his education, representing both masculine culture and the nationalist and militaristic order associated with it. The novel offers a concrete expression of Dolly’s war against this masculine-nationalist entity, which leads her to view the company’s pilots as her opponents and take combative measures against them:

"I began harassing the pilots to increasing degree. [...]. I only wanted to upset their self-confidence a little, shake the Persian carpet under their feet. I wanted to prove to them that you can drown in fire, get burnt by water, and not just rhetorically either." (36)

The link between the nationalist-Zionist ethos and the institution of fatherhood is further expressed through the character of Gordon, encountered by Dolly and described as “the first Jew to work the land since the destruction of the Second Temple” (81), who serves as a parodic representation of the Zionist activist Aharon David Gordon.[[29]](#footnote-29) Gordon, as a symbolic father figure representing the Zionist agenda, cannot reconcile himself to Dolly’s deviation from the bounds of the subject status masculine-Israeli society has assigned her:

"The man stuck to me like a leech. Wherever I went he followed me with his organic vegetables […]. Looking back, he was a pest, but at the time—not that I'd actually converted to his ideas—I let him talk. The only thing I censored was his tendency to sing in the evenings: 'How lovely are the nights in Canaan.' He took an interest in me and the child. He asked questions about his educational upbringing. He inquired as to what school of thought I belonged. –'No school', I said. –'Only earth,' he said after hearing a bit of the child's history. 'Only Mother Earth. You're a bundle of nerves. You belong in earth. You have to find the roots of your soul'." (81)

"'But you know, Dolly,' he said […] Can't you tell the difference between something said seriously and something said metaphorically?' […] Gordon noticed my agitation and stopped talking. After all, he too hadn’t gotten off lightly in life. His worship of the earth and its fruits had made him lose his sense of proportion. Instead of shooting up heroin, he injected himself with chlorophyll […]. He decided that I didn’t have a clear enough idea of my identity, and he drilled me by asking me questions: --'Name please.' –'Dolly.' –'Occupation?' –'Doctor.' –'Family situation?' –'X plus child.' –'What's X plus child?' –'I don’t know, it just came out.' –'Profession?' –'Doctor.' –'Hobbies?' –'Medicine, biology, zoology, pathology.' –'Parents?' –'Two.' –'What do you mean two?' –'Father, mother. Two.' […] –'Place of residence?' –'Dolly City. That's enough. I've had enough for this nonsense. Stop it.'" (82-83)

Gordon’s comments bear witness to the patriarchal effort to cultivate a stereotypical analogy between the individual mother and the nation – “Mother Earth” – which is itself of a piece with Zionist discourse, which structures the territory of the Land of Israel as a desirable women in need of redemption and cultivation. In fact, Gordon suggests that Dolly – in keeping with the patriarchal tradition – think about motherhood through a suitable and appropriate metaphor, which serves to place the concrete experience of motherhood at an even further remove from its nationalist representations. He seeks to resolve Dolly’s lack of adherence to the patriarchal norms of motherhood by identifying her with an unthreatening metaphor, and even demands that she clearly state the subject status she occupies in the prevailing order. Through these examples, Castel-Bloom demonstrates that the act of belonging to Israeli society results in the constant interpellative demand that the individual announce the coordinates of his identity, that he define himself in accordance with clear signifiers of identity suggested to him by the nation, and acquiesce to a demanding other representing the apparatus of state.

The novel links the ideological demand that the mother accede to the status of defined and legitimate subject to a particular usage of language. The aspiration to use language as a vector for stable and permanent meaning, as well as the connection between the mechanism of linguistic naming and the ideological formation of the mother’s cultural role, finds expression in remarks made by Dolly’s mother:

"She would say: That’s a table, Dolly, that’s a chair, this is a living room, this is an open-circuit television. I'm your mother, you're Dolly, and here's a baby. What a beautiful baby! What a darling baby!" (51)

The referential use by Dolly’s mother of symbols of language (table, chair, living room, television) in order to point out distinct objects in actual reality is in keeping with the ideological effort to signify the roles of the family unit (“I’m your mother,” “here’s a baby”) in a clear and explicit manner. In so doing, Dolly’s mother is presented as someone who has internalized patriarchal demands, and as an outstanding agent of the prevailing order.

Language constitutes an integral component of the novel, through which it expresses the subversive and deconstructive tendency of the mythos of Israeli motherhood. Dolly’s over-identification with the category of motherhood, with its nationalist-Israeli associations, is expressed through her adoption of the militaristic language of orders and commands. Dolly’s usage of militaristic language in the framework of her relationship with her son stands as a critique of the nationalist expectation that a mother function as a link in a chain meant to prepare her son for military service.

"Then I opened up his stomach, I held an organ roll call, I demanded to know if they were all present and correct." (31)

"'Get out of the water, that’s an order!' I shouted." (114)

"'Get up!' I commanded the child." (67)

Dolly’s militaristic language demonstrates she, like the nation, simultaneously treats her son as subject and as a child in need of care. This duality, as previously stated, characterizes nationalist discourse as well: the child – as future soldier – is subject to the authority of the military system, but at the same time, the state conceals this fact by presenting itself as a concerned, protective, and inclusive entity. Dolly sustains this duality within herself through her usage of militaristic language in situations meant to express pure maternal concern, apolitical and free of other interests. As in many of the novel’s scenes, here too Dolly’s over-interpretation and exaggerated internalization of nationalist demands play an important role. The militaristic values meant to undergo internalization within the family unit via a host of delicate and quiescent interpellations instead become, in the framework of Dolly’s motherhood, an extended boot camp. To be sure, Dolly carries out her function of preparing her son for military service and the militaristic struggle for survival, but her blatant cruelty in employing this militaristic language of orders and commands, and the discord between the maternal sensitivity expected of her and the militarism she displays, create a critical parody of the family unit’s nationalization.

Dolly’s feeling of loathing for the patriarchal order becomes an inseparable part of both Castel-Bloom’s poetics and Dolly’s usage of language – the same language that expresses her marginal, restrained, and oppressed existence as woman and mother. The rebellion against the symbolic order reveals itself in several noteworthy sections of the novel. First, Dolly sabotages her son’s process of language acquisition and endeavors to thwart his entrance into the symbolic order. She proudly declares: “As an educator, I didn’t teach him to speak – what for? So he could say ‘Mama’?” (57). The instant her son says “Mama” is the instant he becomes an active participant in the effort to define and delimit her by way of the same oppressive language that dictates to her the meaning of motherhood. By sabotaging the process of language acquisition, Dolly teaches her son to speak in an alternative, oppositional language, which not only contains and conveys defiance, but expresses itself through divergence from standardized, correct language:

"The child was three years old, but he scarcely spoke. His motor development was rudimentary. He was slow, and the only thing he knew how to say was 'Don’t wanner,' instead of 'Don’t want to.'" (58)

Dolly’s mangling of the cultural mechanism of naming presents an additional oppositional gesture. A name enables a linguistic relationship with the individual and attaches to him a defined and distinct identity. When Dolly finds the baby and begins to care for him, she takes upon herself, albeit unwillingly, the name “Mama” – a new signifier that erases her prior identity and establishes her, from that point forward, on the basis of her function and obligation to her child. Dolly replicates the act of naming, meant to solidify the bond between child and mother, by choosing to give her son the generic name “Son,”[[30]](#footnote-30) signifying his connection to her:

"Nevertheless, my brain started working overtime thinking of a name for the infant. I thought of "Kid." I assumed that he wouldn’t survive the age of three. I went on racking my brain for names, but all the while the baby was screaming so hard he nearly burst. […]. I lay down on my giant bed […] smoking like a chimney […] then I closed my eyes, and **decided to call him** **Son**, so that if anyone ever called him a son of a bitch, he'd take it personally and beat them up for the both of us." (17; emphasis mine)

Dolly rejects the cultural bias that defines the mother in relation to her child. Calling her child by the name of the position he occupies in relation to his mother – Son – constitutes an attempt to nullify the consideration of motherhood as a category measured and defined solely in terms of the mother’s function and obligation to her child. In other words, Dolly intensifies the relationships of reciprocity, duplication, duality, and heterogeneity denied by patriarchal culture as part of its glorification of childhood individuation and disregard for the two sides of the coin (mother and son) that comprise the maternal function. She names her son according to the same affinity by which culture names her in relation to him, subjecting both mother and son to an equivalent directive (and the same limitations), and restoring balance to the cultural dichotomy between the mother’s obligation to achieve symbiosis with the child, and the child’s obligation to achieve individuation and separation from the mother.

One of Castel-Bloom’s foremost poetic strategies in the novel is the actualization of metaphor and the literalization of figurative, symbolic meaning. Dolly steadfastly refuses to accept the metaphorical cultural meaning of words and expressions, and translates figurative and abstract ideas into literal terms and actions:

"At five in the morning I transplanted Sonny's new kidney. I sewed him up, and with the string I had left over I stuck a few butterfly stiches onto the rest of the surviving babies, but the butterflies, instead of staying where they were and stopping the flow of blood, flew right out and the babies expired one after the other." (47)

"The performance of the atom bombs was truly amazing. Sometimes people came in without heads, but with eyes. Some of them came in without legs, but walking, with shoes full of mud. And the funniest of all were the ones without waists, whose upper and lower halves were connected by association." (152)

Dolly’s failure to relate to words’ metaphorical significance constitutes an oppositional strategy by which she refuses to accept upon herself the conventions of standardized, masculine language, which expresses the nationalistic and gendered norms and ideals that support the prevailing order; she refuses to cooperate with the mechanism of assimilation that serves to conceal the ideological meanings present in language. In so doing, Dolly effects a demythicization of masculine language:[[31]](#footnote-31) she exposes how words’ connotative meaning is part of an ideological mechanism intended to depict cultural constructs, such as motherhood, as ahistorical, self-evident phenomena that appear in a single appropriate manifestation. Moreover, Dolly’s usage of language expresses an effort to wrangle with the system of signs that consistently signifies woman as a metaphor for a host of negative and demeaning attributes. Patriarchal culture depicts femininity as a divergence from the masculine default, and thus transforms it into a super-signifier of divergence as a whole. Therefore, it can be argued that Dolly’s rejection of metaphor, of the symbolic meaning emphasized in language, is an attempt to struggle against the mechanism that turns femininity into metaphor – a signifier stripped of its immediate meanings so that it might become a symbolic representation of the monstrous, the demonic, the repulsive, and the abjected.

**Feminist Cartography and the Mother’s Involvement in the Nationalist Project**

In one episode described in the novel, Dolly carves a map of the Land of Israel into her son’s back:

"I took a knife and began cutting here and there. I drew a map of the Land of Israel during the biblical period on his back, just as I remembered it from school, and marked in all those Philistine towns like Gath and Ashkelon, and with the blade of the knife I etched the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River, which empties out into the Dead Sea that goes on evaporating nonstop. Drops of blood began welling up in the river beds cutting across the country. The sight of the map of the Land of Israel, amateurishly sketched on my son's back, gave me a shiver of delight. At long last I felt that I was cutting into the living flesh. My baby screamed in pain—but I stood firm. […]. I contemplated his carved-up back: it was the map of the Land of Israel, nobody could mistake it." (37-38)

By bringing the map into the domestic sphere and the mother-child relationship, Dolly reveals how the state nationalizes them, and stakes a claim to a political space lying beyond her reach. Carving a map of the Land of Israel into her son’s back expresses Dolly’s aspiration to actively participate in the nationalist-public discourse from which, as a mother and a woman, she is excluded. By becoming involved and participating in the signification of the map and the border, Dolly subverts the role assigned to her by the patriarchy and undermines the accepted and undisputed division between the feminine, maternal voice – private, domestic, and apolitical – and the masculine voice – public, political, and collective. The carving of the map, which has a national-collective value, into the individual’s back demonstrates that “the personal is the political,” and subverts the dichotomy between the private sphere (which is feminine and maternal) and the public (which is masculine, nationalist, and political). The moment of carving the map into the child’s back juxtaposes maternal abuse (which is, as previously stated, analogous to nationalist abuse) with the ideological narrative of Greater Israel. Thus the carving of the map symbolizes the violence inherent to this narrative, which is itself produced under the theoretically “maternal” and protective auspices of the nation.

In the framework of nationalist discourse, the map is intended to reflect stability and even territorial supremacy, and thus is serves as a means of creating a clear and coherent national-collective identity whose borders accord to the territorial borders of the map. By depicting explicit borders and geographical spaces that reflect a clear and settled state of affairs, the map aids in the process of obscuring the epistemological breaks of nationalist identity and repressing the violent conflicts upon which it was initially founded.[[32]](#footnote-32) Yet Dolly does not use the authoritative image of the map in order to repress the violence of the nationalist act; rather, she demonstrates, ironically through the brutal act of carving the map into her son’s back, the violence inherent to the signification of territorial and state borders. She demonstrates how the child (the future soldier) constitutes, in the framework of national existence, a platform for the implementation of violent territorial aspirations, as well as the disfiguring implications of the physical demands the nation makes of its soldiers. Furthermore, it can even be said the transformation of the map into a body part, and its creation as part of the various practices Dolly understands as “maternal care,” provides a critical illustration of the ultimative connection between love for mother and love for homeland demanded by the nationalist ethos.

When her son turns thirteen, Dolly meets him in her sister’s shelter and examines his back:

"[…] and I saw the map of the Land of Israel on his back. The map was amazingly accurate and up-to-date; someone had gone over all the lines and expanded them as the child has grown. I examined the map carefully, and one thing stood out: He has returned to the '67 borders! Beyond belief!" (114)

Compared to the map Dolly carved onto her son’s back when he was an infant, which depicted the imagined biblical space the Zionist movement sought to recreate, the map on her adolescent son’s back (at the symbolic age of thirteen) depicts the borders of Israel after the 1967 war, the war which turned Israel into an occupying power. The presentation of these two different maps, divorced from the historical context that would describe and explain their differences and create a linear, historical, and explicit connection between them, bears witness to Castel-Bloom’s attempt to move from temporal poetics to spatial poetics: the appropriation of the spatial signifier (the map) from the temporal dimension (which allows the maps to be located in the sequence of historical time) produces a distortion of the grand Zionist narrative, which is always teleological, and binds the space to a chronological and progressive temporality. Dolly, who carves the map from her own imagination – and with the help of “all the sites my neglected education succeeded in pulling out of the creaking drawers of my mind (38) – thus produces an individual cartography, feminine, maternal, and feminist, that bears no obligation to the official map signifying nationalist discourse, and does not share the desire to reflect the reality this discourse cultivates. Since the map does not serve Dolly as a means of constructing a collective national identity, the feminist cartography she produces allows her to exchange, even if parodically, the nationalist-masculine progression of generations for an alternative one that integrates feminine and masculine: “Yes, that’s the generation gap for you, I reflected. My mother spits on the Arabs, I look them straight in the eye, and one day my son will lick their assholes” (115).[[33]](#footnote-33)

**Military Induction – Acceptance of the Maternal Role or Anti-Ideological Subversion?**

Throughout the novel, Dolly refuses to accept the conventional gender roles the nation specifies for mothers, and casts doubt on the moral validity of nationalist ideological discourse. Yet when her son is inducted into the military, Dolly is forced against her will into the normative relationship structure assigned to her by nationalist discourse:

"My only son was already fifteen, or so he claimed in his frequent letters. He also sent me Polaroid snapshots of himself waving the Israeli flag on the open sea, or standing to attention at morning roll call on the floating school. I shoved all the snapshots inside my locker at the railway station. Maybe one day, I said to myself, I'll make him an album, who knows. I could have been proud of him, his letters showed more than a spark of sanity. The boy was happy--he was chosen as outstanding cadet. I didn't know what I was supposed to feel. [...]. Every now and then I wrote him letters in which I encouraged him and concluded by telling him to keep up a stiff upper lip and giving him a lot of advice about how to avoid illnesses and what to eat at sea in order not to throw up. But my main advice concerned how to cope at school and how to keep from letting the pressure get him down and upset his peace of mind." (148)

Her son’s induction places Dolly in the position expect of her as a soldier’s mother: she receives letters he writes, encourages him, and diligently adheres to gender-appropriate behavior – passive and supportive. In light of Dolly’s uncompromising rebelliousness throughout the rest of the novel, her assignation to maternal subject status, as demanded by Israeli society, illustrates the immense normalizing force of the military framework, which successfully imposes – even on the insubordinate Dolly – the structure of a “normative” relationship between mother and soldier-son. By all outward appearances, it seems that Dolly, who felt ashamed and somewhat helpless in the face of her new maternal status, has indeed been normalized, and has acceded to the military system’s rules of play.

If Dolly’s opposition to the symbolic order found expression in her decision to not inculcate her child with the masculine tools of language, his military induction is marked by a forced return to this order, which expresses itself, contrary to the muteness that characterized him in his youth, through a nonstop stream of speech. It seems, then, that once removed from Dolly’s grasp, the faculty of speech returns to him as something of a testament to his assimilation into the symbolic order:

"My son talked and talked, as if he'd swallowed a radio. He met people, people shook his hand, he slapped then on the shoulder, he stopped to exchange a few sentences with them about some rock concert, I wasn’t really listening." (116)

The role of the mother who accepts and internalizes the ideological demands of the nation is to give her son over to military authority – a foundational event that divides life into “before” and “after,”[[34]](#footnote-34) which the novel describes as the clearest moment of separation between a mother and her child (a separation that, according to the accepted axis of psychological time, would have occurred even sooner had it not been for Dolly’s intransigence). This separation between mother and soldier child, forced upon her by the state, leaves its marks in the novel’s narrative: immediately after enthusiastically informing his mother of his induction into “the Academy of Brutal Seamanship” (121) – which she perceives as a testimony to her educational failure as a mother – Dolly’s son hospitalizes her in a geriatric facility (when she is only forty-five years old) and vanishes:

"My son hospitalized me in a shelter for the elderly in Dolly City, even though I was only forty-five and in full control of myself and never wet my bed. [...] He'd freed himself of me, no doubt about that, he was his own master, and I no longer troubled myself about him." (157)

It is not just that the military system thrusts “normative” maternal subject status upon the unwilling Dolly, but that, at this narrative moment, and for the first time in the novel, there reemerge both the problem of separation from the mother and the child’s processes of individuation – this time, through the child’s perspective. If before this point it had been Dolly who struggled against the possibility of being separated from her son as part of a process of negotiating her selfhood, now the military authorities have once again made the problem of separation the sole domain of the child. Now it is Dolly’s son who determines the boundaries separating him from his mother, and he becomes responsible for his own disconnection from the maternal-symbolic umbilical cord.

During her stay in the geriatric facility, the psychiatrist tending to Dolly offers her a formulation of the connection between “normative” motherhood and good citizenship, explaining to her how she should behave while her son serves in the Israeli army:

"'Now you'll feel longing for your child. It's natural, do you understand me? When I tell you that it's natural, don't resist it. Go with it, Dolly. Perhaps he'll send you photos, and you'll put them in your wallet in the transparent compartment [...]. You have to remember your child may die in battle. He may die in battle, you've got to get that into your head. [...]. And then, if he dies in battle, you'll be a bereaved mother, just as if you die he'd be an orphan. There are names for things! There are identities! For God's sake, Dolly,' she cried, 'take the lifeline I'm holding out for you, take it and let's put an end to this!" (127)

The psychiatrist’s explicit guidance and instructions serve as an additional testament to the performative aspect inherent to the act of motherhood, and to the assortment of practices that are granted post-facto validity as natural and self-evident features thereof. As the psychiatrist’s comments imply, Dolly’s acceptance of the role created for her by the state would allow her to confidently find her place among prevailing order’s clear categories of identity. A place in which “there are names for things” and “there are identities” is one free of intermediate spaces and grey areas, a place that neutralizes the presence of mixed emotions or internal conflicts. This is precisely the reality that the ideological mechanisms subordinate to the nation seek to create – a certain, clear, self-evident reality that offers a limited range of opportunities for choice and action, and provides explicit, single-meaning definitions, including what constitutes the maternal role, maternal emotion, maternal instinct, and the act of being a good mother. The psychiatrist makes clear to Dolly that a good Zionist mother is expected to withstand the impossible paradox of motherhood created for her by the state with courage and aplomb: she should protect her son at any cost, worry after him and feel intense longing for him, and yet at the same time, she must also expect him to take an active role in the defense of the state, instruct him in self-sacrifice, and, indeed, be capable of sacrificing him.

Furthermore, the comments made by the psychiatrist – who embodies, as a doctor, a kind of civilized and restrained alter ego for Dolly – reveal the symbolic compensation the nation offers to the bereaved mother in exchange for consenting to her gender role in nationalist Israeli culture. Sacrificing a son will award her the official status of bereaved mother and signify her as a darling of the establishment, as someone who performed the loftiest act of all – sacrificed her child on the altar of homeland. By nationalizing personal bereavement and turning it into a collective object[[35]](#footnote-35) – a public subject status the whole of society is enlisted to support – the nation creates a legitimization of the act of sacrifice and reinforces the sense of solidarity of the imagined community, which comes together during times of sorrow and strife. Paradoxically, it is only the loss of a child, and the assumption of the role of bereaved mother, that grant the mother an entry pass into the public sphere and enable her to become a symbol of the national struggle. For the psychiatrist, who represents the hegemonic nationalist ethos, “bereaved mother” constitutes a defined identity, one with a certain prestige, and might thus serve as a potential source of comfort.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The scene that concludes the novel allows for a dual reading of Dolly’s struggle against the patriarchal order and the institution of Israeli motherhood. At first glance, Dolly’s experience of motherhood concludes at the novel’s end in a form Israeli society would consider appropriate and normative. Due to her child’s induction into the military, Dolly succeeds in assenting to the cultural and nationalist demand for individuation – she and her son become two distinct entities, with one continuing life while the other is left behind. It appears that all Dolly has left is to keep apprised of her son’s military life from afar, via the intermediary mechanisms of the symbolic order and its various representatives, from the city officer to the newspaper she reads in her geriatric facility. The distance maintained between Dolly and her son therefore embodies the act of maternal sacrifice demanded by the state, and thus it appears that her motherhood finally finds its proper place after a series of divergences perceived as intolerable by the establishment discourse of both motherhood and nationalism (including the absence of biological pregnancy, the lack of unconditional love, and the maternal self’s attempts at individuation. But one day Dolly reads a newspaper article about a young man who hijacks a plane on its way to Luxembourg:

"One fine day, to tell the truth it was my forty-ninth birthday, I saw one of the old women holding a newspaper with a picture of my son on the front page, looking serious as hell. [...]. She turned the front page towards me and I read: 'Attempt by young crank to hijack Pan-T plane to Luxembourg foiled." I glanced quickly through the item in the newspaper, which the old woman was holding in her trembling hand. The investigators couldn't understand how the young man had succeeded in overcoming the strictest security measures in the world. I went on reading, eager to find out what had happened to him. I understood that he'd been caught, that he'd escaped, that they'd shot him, that he'd been wounded in the back (they never said where in the back--the Jezreel Valley? Or maybe it was bang on Dolly City), that he'd gone on running, that helicopters were searching for him [...]. It didn't bother me one little bit that the kid hadn't succeeded in hijacking the plane. That was all nonsense. My heart pounded in my breast with excitement, I could really feel it expand and contract, and my brain danced inside the receptacle of my skull." (157-158).

Dolly’s response testifies to the satisfaction she feels from her son’s act of violence, which subverts the prevailing order: following his attempt to hijack a plane flown by the national airline (which the novel uses as a representation of the masculine symbolic order), Dolly can finally register her achievement – she has indeed raised a child in her own image, a child who uses an apparatus of the symbolic order (the national airline) to attempt its violent subversion. In this sense, diverting the Pan-T flight is a violent act in keeping with Dolly’s own usage of masculine language and the clichés of patriarchal motherhood. Therefore, her ability to identify the son – the young hijacker – as her own, and to see in him her own parental reflection, can be understood as an attempt to formulate an alternative motherhood, one that cannot be interpreted as adhering to ideological norms, but rather only as a subversive and anti-ideological act. Through her and her son’s mutual denial of the prevailing order, Dolly can credit herself with an achievement perceived by culture as masculine – if the patriarchy defines the father as responsible for the task of constructing the son’s identity (while the mother’s role is either eliminated or limited to reproduction), then in this instance, it is Dolly who leaves an impression on her son’s identity and works to mold it. She who first discovered her child abandoned in a man’s car, and spent her life being followed by various symbolic fathers (the Pan-T company, Gordon, the child’s grandfather) who demanded that she share ownership of her son and interfered in the task of motherhood, can now ascribe to herself – to her educational methods, her character traits, her struggles – the subversive and aggressive act carried out by her son.

With the book’s closing words – “I was worried about the boy, but I wasn’t hysterical. I knew that after everything I'd done to him—a bullet or a knife in the back were nothing he couldn’t handle” (158) – Dolly justifies her abusive and invasive mothering as positive and worthwhile, since the maternal practices she adopted toughened her son and gave him the tools to survive his desertion and rebellion against the military system and the national order. As a result, Castel-Bloom is able to expose the problematic implications of the absence of maternal possibility, the grim and pessimistic results of the nationalist paradox latent in the ideal of the good Israeli mother, who simultaneously protects and sacrifices. She becomes violent, paranoid, and aggressive, even ultimately creating the subject the national community refuses to imagine. Even so, Dolly’s ability to formulate her motherhood and bond to her son specifically against the backdrop of his open rebellion against the national order can be read as a positive and optimistic possibility, a survival strategy for a mother who refuses to negate herself in the face of the nation’s ideological demands, who fashions for herself an alternative language through which she seeks to express, in her own voice, her maternal experience.

1. Orly Castel-Bloom, *Dolly City*, Trans. Dalya Bilu, Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010 [1992], pp. 57. From this point on, the page numbers appearing in the body of the text refer to this source [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As Anderson writes: "No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely because they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them, has no true precedents in earlier times. […] Yet void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly national imaginings." (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. New York: Verso Books, 2006 [1983], pp. 9) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example:

   Patrizia Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation, Guardians of the Hearth: Women, Family and Nationalism in 20th Century Europe*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004; Anne McClintock, "Family feuds: Gender, nationalism and the family." *Feminist Review* 44 (1993): 61-80; Nira Yuval-Davis. *Gender and Nation: SAGE Publications*. Vol. 49. Sage, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thus, for example, Virginia Woolf described the forced neutrality of her cultural status as a woman during the Second World War: 'Our Country'… throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions… Therefore if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or 'our' country, let it be understood… that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share. For… in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world." (Woolf, Virginia. *The selected works of Virginia Woolf*. Wordsworth Editions, 2007, pp. 861) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Anthias, Floya, and Nira Yuval-Davis. *Woman-nation-state*. Springer, 1989, pp. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on these feminine figurations in nationalist discourse, see:

   Yuval-Davis, 1997

   Enloe, Cynthia. *The morning after: Sexual politics at the end of the Cold War*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yuval-Davis and Anthias, pp. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nira Yuval-Davis writes:

   "According to different national projects, under specific historical circumstances, some or all women of the child-bearing age group would be called on, sometimes bribed, and sometimes even forced, to have more, or fewer, children." (Yuval-Davis, 1997, pp. 22) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Albanese, 2004, pp. 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dolly City, which appears to be a grotesque reflection of Tel Aviv, constitutes a kind of nightmare vision of a decayed society, chaotic and stripped of solidarity, ruled by spontaneous outbursts of violence, a sense of despair, and arbitrarily applied force: “Dolly City, a city without a base, without a past, without an infrastructure. The most demented city in the world. All the people in Dolly City are usually on the run. Since they're always running, there's always someone chasing them, and since there's someone chasing them, they catch them and execute them and throw them into the river” (77). The novel’s description of Dolly City, as well as its host of references – both direct and implied – to Zionist history, allow one to see in it a dystopian version of the Israeli state. Zionist ideology presented Jewish history – from Biblical times unto the modern era – as a continuous teleological movement, within which was made possible the national revival of the Jewish people in the land (and state) of Israel. As a dystopian space, Dolly City undermines the Zionist narrative’s principles of causativeness, linearity, and chronological continuity: it conducts itself according to laws of time and space that diverge from the reader’s realistic norms [“It was August, snow was falling softly” (29); “Another April came to an end, the fifth in succession, and February arrived” (111)], and thus reinforces its status as negative image of the utopian Israeli society imagined by Zionist ideology. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I rely here on the distinction made by Adrienne Rich between the experience and the institution of motherhood. Rich explains that the creators of motherhood as institution are governments, employers, doctors, childcare experts, psychiatrists, and husbands, as well as economic, legal, health-related, and emotional concepts, principles, and organizations, all of which classify a woman, first and foremost, as either mother or not-mother, and dictate her emotional, mental, and physical stances. Patriarchal society, Rich argues, structures motherhood as the central task of a woman’s life, as the realization of her feminine nature, and as the ultimate actualization of her human nature. This point of view eliminates the gap between being a woman and being a mother, allowing men direct access to feminine powers of creation (Rich, Adrienne, *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*, WW Norton & Company, 1995, pp. 314-315). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dana Olmert argues that canonical Hebrew literature between the years 1940 and 1990 includes countless figures of soldiers, living and dead, combat or non-combat, but very few mothers managed to find themselves at center stage in narratives, or receive any sort of complex or profound characterization. Most of these mothers, in the struggle between fidelity to the national ethos or fidelity to family, appear in this literature as an inseparable part of the dominant nationalist ideology, as its passive supporters. However, beginning in the 1990s, in the wake of various historical events (such as the first Lebanon war, the foundation of the “Four Mothers” organization, the first Intifada, and the Oslo Accords), the role of soldiers’ mothers in Israeli society began to change, challenging the supremacy of nationalist ideological discourse. The mothers’ entrance into the public sphere, their involvement with military processes, and their influence on the way the political system’s decisions were received, led to the weakening of nationalist discourse’s formations of gender. Said processes also seeped into literature, sparking a dramatic change in the way soldiers’ mothers were depicted in the era’s Hebrew literature: instead of dim and marginal figures, hardly present at all, they became central, dominant characters, expressing ambivalence towards that ideological norms of nationalist Israeli discourse.

    Olmert, Dana. "Mothers of Soldiers in Israeli Literature: The Return of the Politically Repressed." *Prooftexts* 33.3 (2013): 333-364. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rich, 1995, pp. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In fact, Dolly’s discovery of the child is described in the novel as a moment of disorientation, in which the things Dolly experiences fail to correspond to her schemata:

    "**I began to hear sounds that were incompatible with my surroundings. I couldn't locate these sounds anywhere in the landscape**, they seemed to be coming from inside the car itself. I pulled up to the side of the road, and my eyes came to rest on a black plastic bag lying at the back of the car, on the ledge between the backseat and the rear window. [...]. I opened the plastic bag, and there, wrapped in Health Department diapers, lay a blue, hungry baby." (14; emphasis mine) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kristeva describes the concept of abjection in her book *Powers of Horror* (1980). She explains that the concept of abjection points to what has been rejected from the body, what has been removed and set aside and designated “Other.” In the framework of her discussion of the concept of abjection, Kristeva exposes the conflict inherent to it: whatever has been removed from me is indeed abjected, yet it was within me and was part of who I am. Contending with this conflict transforms abjection into a conjunction of phobia, obsession, and perversion. But contrary to the reading I suggest, Kristeva sees in abjection a means of describing the maternal body and the child’s process of separation therefrom: on the way to fulfilling his cultural mission of acquiring a distinct identity, the child not only separates from the mother, but also rejects the maternal body, perceiving it as Other and abjected.

    Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. University Presses of California, Columbia, and Princeton, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The possibility that Dolly City constitutes a synecdochical representation of the State of Israel as a whole casts the decision to title the novel *Dolly City*, after the space rather than the protagonist, as evidence not only of the ideological overlap between these two entities, but of the ideological fetishization of the nation (itself dubbed a symbolic mother) and its total dominance over private life. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Foucault, Michel. *The history of sexuality. Vol. 1: The will to knowledge*. Penguin Books Limited, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Here I apply to the concept of motherhood Judith Butler’s definition of gender as the product of physical signification composed of acts and gestures that create the illusory effect of an internal gendered essence. Butler summarizes the understanding that gender is constituted by acts and gestures by terming gender “performance.” Butler writes in her book *Gender Trouble*:

    "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self." (Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, Routledge, 2011, pp. 179) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Elisabeth Badinter argues that maternal love was not thought of as a self-evident phenomenon in the period she studies – seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France – nor was it experienced as a natural phenomenon or as testament to any moral inclination. Badinter demonstrates that a systematic survey of historical documents provides ample testimony to social acceptance of indifferent and even wholly disinterested attitudes towards newborns on the part of the mother. Thus, Badinter writes, the assumption that mothers are motivated by natural impulses and instincts that causes them to feel concern for their children’s welfare or protect them at any cost cannot withstand historical inquiry, and constitutes an ideological construct.

    Badinter, Elisabeth. *The myth of motherhood: An historical view of the maternal instinct*, Souvenir Press (E & A), 1981, pp. 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Roni Halpern, *Body and its Discontents*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2013, pp. 170-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In her essay “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva argues that patriarchal-Christian Western culture structured its concept of appropriate, suitable motherhood according to the example of the holy mother – the Virgin Mary. Kristeva discusses the disparity between the figure of the holy mother and her own experience of pregnancy and motherhood, which was heterogeneous and based on a constant movement between singularity and multiplicity, similarity and difference. Her image of the holy mother, who gives virgin birth to her son Jesus, constitutes an example of the dichotomy constructed by the patriarchy between the heretical woman, wanton and sexual, and the maternal woman, who is (despite the fact of her motherhood) pure and virginal. In this light, one can read the sudden and unexplained appearance of the baby in Dolly’s life and her transformation into a mother without having experienced physical childbirth as a parodic representation of the patriarchal paradox that seeks to establish woman as, simultaneously, mother and holy virgin.

    Kristeva, Julia, and Arthur Goldhammer. "Stabat mater." *Poetics Today* (1985): 133-152. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. As Kristeva argues in “Women’s Time,” the biological processes of motherhood diverge from the traditional principles of identity and difference: "Pregnancy seems to be experienced as the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech."

    Kristeva, Julia, Alice Jardine, and Harry Blake. "Women's Time." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7.1 (1981): 13-35, pp. 28.

    Kristeva’s comments illustrate the female body’s act of duplication during pregnancy, as well as the figuration of the pregnant woman as a divided and fragmentary subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Aharon David Gordon (1856-1922) was an intellectual, author, and publisher who served as a mentor for the pioneers who immigrated to the Land of Israel during the second and third *aliyot*. Gordon was a prominent activist in the Zionist movement and participated in the Zionist Congress. He is especially well-known as the founder of a school of ethics called, after his death, “the religion of labor,” based on the belief that the revival of the land and the nation could only begin through physical labor, particularly working the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In Hebrew, the word “son” (*ben*) has a dual meaning, representing both gender descriptor (boy) and function in the family unit (son). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Per Roland Barthes, Myth is a second order of signification, by which a sign is granted an additional meaning (called the connotation) that diverges from its immediate, basic, literal meaning (called the denotation). Barthes argues that Myth fulfills an ideological function: the additional meanings accrued to words are meant to consolidate a particular perception of reality, which is necessarily ideological and in service to a political interest. Myth, Barthes continues, acts as a “sedative,” because it presents ideological meanings meant to be accepted as established and self-evident truths, rather than as one possibility – relative, historical, and variable – of ascribing meaning. Wherever there exists a historical situation open to interpretation, Myth creates the illusion of something obvious and eternal.

    (Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers*.* New York: Hill and Wang, 1972 [1957]).

    In this context, it is instructive to recall the philosophical discussion of the question of the value of truth in metaphorical expressions, which concluded that metaphor is a false claim, and to ascribe a value of truth to it, one must find, to the extent possible, its literal substitute (for further discussion, see: "Public Text and Common Reader," *Reconstructing Literature*, Oxford, 1983, pp. 40-41). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Hannan Hever, "From Hebrew Literature to Israeli Literature", *Theory and Criticism* 20 (2002): pp. 167-169; 185-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Dana Olmert and Uri S. Cohen argue that the episode of carving the map of the Land of Israel into the child’s back constitutes an additional example of the poetic strategy of actualizing metaphor that characterizes the novel. Cohen argues that, by carving the map, Dolly actualizes the metaphor “to cut into living flesh” (which means an uncompromising trimming and reduction, or a merciless analysis), while Olmert argues that the carving produces an concrete embodiment of the influence of Israeli language, according to which “the security of the state is laid upon the shoulders of her soldier-children.” If the map is an expression of the poetic strategy of actualizing metaphor, then this strategy makes clear that the connection between the map and reality it points towards is not direct and immediate, but metaphorical. Just as metaphor maintains the gap between tenor and vehicle, so too is the map an actualization of a metaphorical idea, or a metaphorical conception of reality (such as “Greater Israel”), which is not reality itself.

    (Uri S. Cohen, *Reading Orly Castel-Bloom*, Tel Aviv: Ahuzat Beit, 2011; Olmert, 2013, pp. 360). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Tamar El-Or, "Conditions of Love: The work of motherhood around the army camp," *Theory and Criticism* 19 (Fall 2001): 79-114. [in Hebrew] [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Hannah Naveh, "On Loss, Bereavement, and Mourning in Israeli Existence," *Alpayim* 16 (1998), pp. 85-120 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Castel-Bloom’s decision to discuss bereavement from a maternal perspective constitutes a new wrinkle in Israeli nationalist discourse (and in Hebrew literature), which had previously tended to present the problem of bereavement solely from the paternal perspective. The figure of the bereaved father is depicted in nationalist discourse as sanctified and admirable, someone who, like Abraham binding his son, sacrifices his child on the altar of homeland for the sake of the state’s continued existence. Even when Hebrew literature (particularly that of the State Generation) began to offer a more critical take on the figure of the bereaved father, who sacrifices his son on the altar of homeland for the sake of realizing a personal interest in greatness, it still maintained its gender bias, according to which the problem of bereavement was a drama whose protagonists were father and son. In other words, many literary works that sought to shatter the dominant ethos and the halo around the admirably bereaved father figure’s head (in an effort to indicate the ideological sea change occurring in Israeli society) relegated the mother to the margins, or even entirely excluded her. Despite the mother’s importance to the Zionist initiative as a reproductive force, she was stripped of any real ability to involve herself in the “binding” of the son, which was, in the framework of Hebrew military culture, the sole domain and responsibility of the father.

    “From ‘Sanctification of the Name’ to ‘Bliss of Aqedah’: The Invention of ‘Isaac’ as a Heroic Figure in Zionist Discourse,” *ISRAEL* 12 (Fall 2007): 107-151 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)