**Bottele Blond[[1]](#footnote-1) in Hollywood?**

**On Feminism, Gender, Ethnicity and Race in Children’s Literature: *Malki Monroe Mordoch* as a Study Case**

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**Introduction**

Within the landscape of Israeli children literature analysis, issues of race and ethnicity are mostly negated from scholarly discourse. Specifically, with regard to Mizrahi Jews (Jews who immigrating from Arab and Muslim countries), societal taboo regarding the discrimination this group suffers from (unlike other forms of social othering, such as discrimination against women, Palestinians, etc.) has seeped into the children's literature academic sphere, which remained silent on this crucial social rift. This article establishes a new tradition of critical Mizrahi (and feminist-Mizrahi) reading of Israeli children's literature, and demonstrate the potential Mizrahi perspectives offer to children's literature analysis.

Specifically, this article utilizes the Mizrahi critical lens to one case study: a recent feminist canonical Israeli children's book. *Malki Monroe Morduch*, which narrates the story of a Mizrahi girl who dreams of becoming a Hollywood star. Utilizing an intersectional Mizrahi-feminist analysis, this article demonstrates how sexist and racist stereotypes determine this protagonist's fate, limiting her dreams to leave the private sphere solely in the fantastic realm, while also constructing her as dumb, lazy, and superficial. A bottle-blonde. Her construction deepens the East/West orientalist binary, by marking clear ethnic boundaries that present Mizrahi Jews as a distinct and inferior category.

Critical discussion around children’s literature, which necessarily encompasses both written and visual texts, is crucial because readers tend to be too young to develop much critical analytical skills of their own. It is also the age when socialization into gender, ethnic, class, and other identities occurs. Canonical literature, including that aimed at children, is not produced in a vacuum; rather it simultaneously reflects and constitutes hegemonic discourse. It does so by reinforcing extant value systems and social positions, facilitating the assumption of cultural identities, and constituting and reproducing social structures. As a hegemonic agent of socialization and as a textual and visual field, children’s literature allows us therefore to observe some of the lines that trace a portrait of the social context in which it was produced.

Children’s literature explicit goal is to elicit pleasure by building a fictional reality, while its implicit goal is to impart a socially, ideologically and politically hegemonic worldview. The use of two registers – textual and visual – simultaneously enhances the impression that the fictional reality is a faithful representation of the non-fictional world. Despite the differences between the two registers, both aim to produce an idea or an affect through various representational means. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Research in Israeli children's literature deals little with the question of accepting the "other." When it does so, it focuses on a narrow range of "legitimate" recognized identities: Palestinians, people with disabilities, immigrants, or LGBT people.[[3]](#footnote-3) Critical research whose corpus is children's literature exist, although the field of critical research in children's literature is only recently emerging.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, There is no research on the othering of ethnic identities in Israel despite the presence of such practices in the books themselves, and a Mizrahi reading of Israeli children literature is currently non-existing.

This is a missing research discipline with the potential to shed crucial light on the influence of children's literature on shaping ethnic identity, just as critical political and gender-based analyses shed light on the shaping of political and gender identities.

The importance of Mizrahi criticism in children's literature is not only the creation of an academic research stream, but the creation of a discursive site that enables a profound examination of society and its construction of children identities through children's literature: experiences of belonging to- or alienation from the hegemonic center; legitimacy for feelings and emotions, or the silencing and negation of them.

Therefore, I propose in this article to expand the boundaries of hegemonic narrative discourse, and to establish critical Mizrahi (and feminist-Mizrahi) readings of Israeli children's literature as vital within the toolkit of critical children's literature's research.

In this article I discuss a single children’s book as a case study, which demonstrates the general trends of change in practices of racialization in canonical Israeli children’s literature, from overt racial-stereotypical iconography towards subtle camouflage. It also exemplifies the gordian knot that entangles ethnic identity, geographical location and class in representations of characters of Mizrahi descent. The book I discuss demonstrates practices of racialization; the constitution of Mizrahi identity; the legitimation of social hierarchies through representations of Mizrahi-identified characters as inferior, a practice which allows the hegemonic group to remain opaque and hence to preserve its normative status. The reproduction of power inequities by subtle suggestion of a commitment to political correctness, marks the recognition of Mizrahi identity and marginalization as “dangerous” to social unity, thereby disallowing open, legitimate discussion of historic discrimination and future redistribution of resources. The new racism reflects color-myopia and constitutes it through thematic and visual means. [[5]](#footnote-5)

The discussion in the book mentioned will utilize critical analytical tools in the spirit of deconstructionist literary theory, feminist scholarship and Mizrahi Studies. The methodological assumption I build on in my reading is adopted from Derida’s approach, which argues that any text may be subject to infinite analysis, and that the purpose of deconstruction is to take apart structures of signification to reveal the ideological assumptions they are constructed upon. Such a reading aims to problematize the text’s meaning-making process; it expresses the wide recognition in contemporary literary critique that meaning does not arise primordially from the text as-is, and that the reader therefore must produce an analysis reciprocally *with* the text. The reader does not simply identify existing power-relations represented within the text, but examines the specific responses the text elicits among historically-contingent readers. Scholars of literary theory emphasize that, in order to recreate the meaning of a text, it must be read in reverse and against its own grain, searching for moments of breakage, repression, denial and silence. [[6]](#footnote-6)

In this article I wish to argue that a feminist character of Mizrahi descent would not be granted the privilege to break the feminist glass ceiling, and that she will be subjected to racism and intersectional gender and ethnic oppression. Gender oppression prohibits her from exiting the private sphere into the public sphere in substantial ways, leaving her desire to reach public success unfulfilled, consigned to the fictional and the fantastical. Racism and ethnic oppression build on her construction as an inferior character, lacking in potential, a construction directly related to her ethnic identity. I will further argue that the children’s book I discuss represents a hegemonic-Ashkenazi work, which reinforces the East/West dichotomy by subtly and implicitly marking ethnic boundaries that necessarily place Mizrahi identity at an inferior position. [[7]](#footnote-7)

**I. Racialization practices in Israeli children's literature**

Characters with dark skin colors (brown and black) are usually absent from Israeli children's literature. This lack of visibility and representation could by itself mark their symbolic extinction from the way in which Israeli reality is reflected through children's books. Despite the paucity of books in Israeli children's literature from its inception to the present, their examination still provides expensive lessons and insights.

A chronological reading of race and ethnicity within Israeli children's literature illustrates the change in the representation of black and brown characters. I offer the following analysis of this change: from overt stereotypical racial iconography - to implicit camouflage and the Gordian knot that is created between ethnicity, periphery, and class to dark colors, based on a constituted dichotomy between white = good and black = evil.

This evolution can be divided, I argue, into three main thematic and visual practices of racialization: *establishment, justification and preservation*. These practices schematically present the alteration from the first stages of Israeli children's literature to the present. From this chronological order it follows that each practice also contains its predecessors, preserved through different thematic and visual depictions. This section briefly reviews this process.

1. Establishment: constructing the "other" though racialization and objectification

הביטוי לזה בספרי הילדים יהיה באמצעות הרחקת זירת העלילה למרחב מזרחי המוצג כפנטזיה קולוניאלית רומנטית שמעורבים בה בלא אבחנה מבדלת אפריקה ואסיה; כינויים פוגעניים (למשל, כושון; שחרחרון, המתחרז עם כנויים גזעניים שהיו מיוחסים ליהודים-יהודון) גוון האחיד של צבע העור שאין בו גווני ביניים, מבע אטום של פני מסכה וכן שכפול הדמויות והשטחתן הפלקטית, שנוטלת מהן נפח ועומק. זו השטחה סימבולית של דמות שהופכת להיות מגזרת נייר אבל לא ייצוג של אדם עם אישיות, מבע אנושי, אופי וסממנים ייחודיים. הדמויות תופענה לרוב בעירום מלא או חלקי כאובייקטים חסרי שם, או ששמן יהיה כינוי על צבע עורן. רמת האלימות כלפי דמויות אלה תהיה גבוהה באופן יחסי למופעי האלימות בספרות הילדים בכלל ופעמים האחריות על האלימות תוטל עליהם אף שהם קורבנותיה.

מופעי ההגזעה בספרות הילדים העכשווית השתנו גם כתוצאה משיח 'הפוליטקלי-קורט' והם באים לביטוי בהנגדה בולטת בין דמויות של לבנים וחומים ושחורים באווירת האיור ובאופן המבסס אינפנטיליזציה שלהן ואת היחס אליהן כאל אובייקט.

**2.** הפרקטיקה השנייה היא: **הצדקת ההיררכיות בין הקבוצות באמצעות הצגת האחר כפרימיטיבי, נחות מוסרית ואלים**

הדימוי החזותי של דמויות כהות יהיה של חוסר עידון ווולגריות, המוניות וכל מה שיראה ההיפך מעידון ואיפוק. דמויות אלה ייטו לאלימות כלפי הסובבים אותם והם יוצגו כבעלות פוטנציאל לפשיעה. מבחינה תמטית יהיו אלה פעמים רבות דמויות שותקות שהמידע עליהם נודע לנו מפיו של המספר המתבונן עליהן בהתנשאות ומפקיע מהן את זכות לקול משלהן. ההנגדה בין הקבוצות של כהים ולבנים מאפשרת סימון גבולות וקביעת היררכיות, מה שמאפשר לקבוצה ההגמונית להישאר שקופה ולשמור על מעמדה כנורמטיבית.

**3.** הפרקטיקה השלישית היא**: שימור יחסי הכוח באמצעות הסוואה מרומזת**

כיום השיח הגזעי והאתני הוא לעיתים שיח סמוי, מוסווה ומרומז. המוטיבציה להסוואה המרומזת היא לא רק המחויבות לתקינות פוליטית, אלא בעיקר "הסכנה" בהגדרת האשכנזיות כקטגוריה שתחייב להגדיר גם את המזרחיות כקטגוריה, מה שעלול להוביל לשיח גלוי ולגיטימי על הכרה בקיפוח ועל חלוקת משאבים. לכן הגזענות החדשה המתהדרת בנרטיב הניאו-ליברלי על פי כולם שווים ולכולם יש הזדמנות שווה, לוקה בעיוורון צבעים חזותי, שמסמן דמויות מזרחיות באמצעות הסוואה מרומזת של מזרחיות. ביחס לדמויות יעשה שימוש במטבעות לשון הלקוחות מהשיח המזרחי או מהשיח על מזרחיים, למשל תלונות על מסכנות וקיפוח; תביעה לצדק ושוויון המוצגת באופן מלגלג; עצלות; מיקום הסיפור במרחב זמן היסטורי על מנת להזים את קיומו בהווה.

**Narrative Analysis**

The book *Malki Monroe Mordoch*[[8]](#footnote-8) was written by Nurit Zarḣi and illustrated by Batya Qolton. The book narrates the story of a girl named Malka Mordoch, nicknamed Malki, who dreams of being a Hollywood star and celebrity.

Following the logic of the third stage of racialization practices, this book masks the ethnic themes central to it. Thus, part of the analysis must be dedicated to exposing the *mere fact* that its protagonist is of Mizrahi origin, as I later show.

The protagonist’s story takes place in the private sphere and in spaces immediately adjacent to it: the home, the neighborhood and the school. Her aspirations, on the other hand, carry her towards a public sphere which remains an unrealized fantasy for her.

One of the most deeply-held and entrenched mechanisms in our culture to constitute social structures is the ideological-political distinction between the private and the public. Societal norms construct feminine roles as taking place in the private sphere, or the home, while male roles take place in the public sphere. This distinction allows for the exclusion of women and femininity from public-political space. The distinction between the two spheres constitutes a hierarchical structure, which reproduces inequality and naturalizes gender differences, while obscuring the patriarchal order which constituted the distinction to begin with. The separation between the two spheres operates on the basis of a myriad of infrastructural mechanisms of oppression and control that exclude women from positions of power and governance. Young[[9]](#footnote-9) lists these mechanisms: marginalization, invisibility, gender myopia, transparency, denial, silencing, and disempowerment. In literature in general, and in children’s literature in particular, legitimacy is granted to women’s presence in the public sphere only for reasons relating with familial and homemaking obligations. In most cases where a female character enters the public sphere, her transgression of the natural order requires a substantial legitimation. Further, it is usually limited in both time and space, and the woman is usually accompanied by others.[[10]](#footnote-10) Likewise, only very few children’s books describe female characters stepping into the public sphere to fulfil personal aspirations. The women protagonists that do so are usually ethnically unmarked, and are therefore implicitly hegemonic characters.

Malki Monroe Mordoch's narrative structure shifts between realism and fantasy, allowing for two contradictory interpretive options – the realistic register and the fantastical order. These two registers coexist, and yet each excludes the possibility of the other. Each of the registers is supported by its own evidence, and the readers are given the freedom to decide between the two. Malki’s story, the female protagonist, takes place within the private sphere,[[11]](#footnote-11) while in her imagined reality she pines for inclusion in the public sphere. The spheres are constituted as separate and distant worlds with an endlessly deep chasm between them, with Malki inhabiting both, one in dream and the other in the reality of her life bounded to her home, neighborhood and school.

Malki speaks of her dream-world with those around her:

*Malki did not keep her plans a secret. She told her mother and father about them […] she even notified her dog that they are going to go to Hollywood.[[12]](#footnote-12)*

The fact that Malki discusses her dream with those around her can testify to one of two options: either Malki wholeheartedly believes she can accomplish it, or she does not have faith in her ability to fulfil the dream. According to this interpretation, by sharing it with everyone she hopes to publicly mark it as a goal, thus substantiating it to herself and enhancing her commitment to its fulfilment.

Malki’s dream is very distant from her mundane life, just as her name, *Malcha* [lit. queen], is distant from her reality. Her home is located in an unspecified provincial neighborhood; her surname – Mordoch – places her in a Kurdish-Iraqi immigrant context, a Mizrahi variation of the biblical name Mordechai.

Malki is described as an unremarkable student, which is why she:

*Spends long hours in school, first in regular classes, than afternoon in supplementary classes for those who haven’t mastered reading and writing yet.[[13]](#footnote-13)*

As mentioned, Malki’s biographical and geographical characteristics, stereotypical of an underprivileged Mizrahi girl, are stacked against her. Nonetheless she takes various actions meant to advance her goal of becoming a Hollywood star. She finds consolation in her initials, which offer an escape from her everyday reality and from her real name, and allow her to enact the possibility of realizing the dream:

*She would draw on all the empty pages the letters M. M. over and over, because if someone wants to be a Hollywood star, it is good that their first name and surname begin with the same letter*[[14]](#footnote-14)

In discussions on identity-transition and assimilation, the practice of changing one’s name and particularly one’s surname is a reoccurring theme. In the Israeli context, many people with Mizrahi-identified names change them to names that are perceived to be "Israeli" and ethnically non-specific.[[15]](#footnote-15) This phenomenon is due to the fact that names carry with them a cultural baggage of ethnicity, geographic origin and class; the purpose of the change is to convert low with high symbolic capital, thus allowing for social mobility.[[16]](#footnote-16) The narrative imparts Malki and readers with the understanding that her name is a primary marker of ethnic identification, although even this move by Malki does not spare her from the failure she is destined to. Following the assimilation logic, Malki also dies her hair blonde as a means of advancing her towards fulfilling her dream. The narrative presents her belief that the color of her hair can determine her chances of success as a marker of her shallowness; it characterizes Malki as lacking in practical and realistic thinking, as she fails to consider the qualities and skills required to succeed in the real-world Hollywood-based entertainment industry, such as acting ability, voice training and singing skills. Malki is focused on her external appearance, allowing us to adopt an ironic position vis-à-vis the glamorous superficiality of show business. Malki’s choice of dying her hair blonde relies on the obvious cultural connotations of blonde hair as assigning, on the one hand, elitist societal status for those born with it and, on the other, lower status for those attempting to impersonate them. The longing for blonde hair is a manifestation of the longing for whiteness which is built into the East-West power relation. The Hollywood-produced construct of blonde glamour is ubiquitous and establishes external parameters of success far exceeding the boundaries of Hollywood itself. Naomi Wolf argues that our culture is saturated with models of beauty to which we are exposed from the moment we are born and which we internalize over many years,[[17]](#footnote-17) and that the aspiration to enact these models victimizes women. Israeli parlance even assigns a specific term for women impersonating blondes, a term which is a synthesis of *ṡḣora* [black] and *blondinit* [blonde] - *ṡḣordinit*, a derogatory term similar to the American "bottle-blonde"*.* Both the Hebrew *ṡḣordinit* and the American Bottle blonde center the theme of impersonation and deceit. Malki, much to her dismay, is unable to "pass" as a real blond. After we were made aware of Malki’s ethnic identity through her surname, thus locating her as a marginalized character longing to succeed in a world that glamorizes whiteness, we return to it at the point where the narrative marks Malki’s literal failure to distance herself from her roots.

איור 1 מהספר: **מלכי מונרו מורדוך** (זרחי, 2010).[[18]](#footnote-18)

In her attempt to dye her hair, Malki enacts a practice of ‘Ashkenazification’ whose purpose is to prevent her identification as part of the ethnic group assigned to her and with which her identity is tainted, thus allowing her to enjoy the opportunities and privileges reserved to members of unmarked, transparent hegemonic group.[[19]](#footnote-19) Unfortunately, her ashkenazification is doomed to failure and only reinforces her ethnic marking; as Sasson-Levi and Shoshana (2014) state, the ethnicized subject would forever remain ethnic-Mizrahi. The practice of ashekanizifaction enacted by Malki, in addition to changing her name, is marked by the brown roots of her hair, and by an explicit statement that the dying proved to be a failure:

*Despite her mother’s shouting she dyed her hair blonde to make it fit a star, although it did not turn out so well.[[20]](#footnote-20)*

The illustration elects to visibly ‘ashkenazify’ Malki by omitting any visual markers of a Mizrahi girl. It further blurs the narrative lines by depicting Malki’s mother as sporting blonde hair. The nullification of visual markers of ethnic identity examplifies the practice of subtle camouflage. The visual color myopia is a muted move performed by the illustration; while the text informs us that the protagonist is Mizrahi, the illustration undermines this identification and prevents the readers from visually confirming it. This suggests that Malki and her mother’s performance is purely external, and their Mizrahi-ness represents an inherent and irredeemable essence.[[21]](#footnote-21) Does the possibility of enacting a different ethnic performance testify to the potential traversability of symbolic ethnic boundaries? The possibility of crossing symbolic ethnic boundaries is generally preserved for those with lighter skin and other physical characteristics that allow them to pass as Ashkenazi. The act of ashkenazification recounted in the narrative shows that, in Malki’s case, her attempts at ashkenazification does not allow her such traversal. Furthermore, it can be argued that her act of ashkenazification is precisely what she is punished for at the end, her radical attempt to challenge the principle of “the fiction of ethnic coherence”[[22]](#footnote-22) which tends to affirm existing societal order by demanding correlation between ethnic origin, skin and hair color, behavior and life-opportunities.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Malki’s immediate familial and social surroundings dismiss her dreams and the possibility of her placing herself outside the private sphere where her everyday life takes place. In this context her parents tell her:

*It’s not realistic, no one from the Mordoch family was ever a Hollywood celebrity, and so has no one from the neighborhood. Malki thought that that doesn’t matter.[[24]](#footnote-24)*

Malki’s parents internalize the societal gaze that diminishes them, explaining to her that her chances of success are slim, reproducing the same gaze on her while marking through parental care the symbolic boundaries imposed on her, pushing her to return to her assigned place in the accepted ethnic order.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The narrative presents readers with both perspectives, that of Malki’s parents and that of Malki herself, allowing them to determine between the adult, realistic worldview on the one hand and Malki’s aspirational, arguably fantastical dreams. Malki’s parents realize that explanations alone would not dissuade her from her goal. In an attempt to find a practical solution, they hope that a pet might help her return to reality: “The parents said ‘we need to clear her head of the nonsense, maybe a dog could help.’”[[26]](#footnote-26) The plot subsequently takes a turn when Malki’s uncle brings her a dog.

איור 2 מהספר: **מלכי מונרו מורדוך**

Before I address the plot-turn that revolves around the arrival of the dog, I must address two issues: the subject of animal representation in children’s literature, and the manner of characterization of the dog in the story itself.

Children’s books that place animals at their center are very common. Such animal-characters are often metonymic to a child whether they inhabit a realistic or a fantastical plain.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The question of how the dog is characterized in the story was addressed by the illustrator in an interview she gave to promote the book’s publication:

*I really liked the story, but the issue of the dog bothered me. What kind of dog should I draw? My first attempt was of course a poodle like the kind that models have. But then I realized that this is too obvious a choice and that there’s no great personality here, since Marilyn is kind of a wonder-dog with wit and independence. I tried to go the opposite direction by drawing clumsy dogs far from the fantasy, like Malki is far from it. But that didn’t seem believable. So I met Nurit again to consult with her on who this dog might be. Nurit appeared for our meeting with her Chihuahua and it immediately hit both of us: Marilyn has to be a Chihuahua!! I was very happy. Chihuahuas are precisely the kind of dogs it’s interesting to stylize. Is it a mouse? A bat? What is it?[[28]](#footnote-28)*

איור 3 מהספר: **מלכי מונרו מורדוך** ואריאציות לאיור הכלבה ומקור ההשראה, מתוך ראיון עם המאיירת (קולטון, 2010).

The dog is therefore a Chihuahua, the smallest breed of dogs in the world, characterized by large eyes and large, perked-up ears. They have a stubborn and curious temper and are defined as a recreational breed. Malki and the dog have one characteristic in common which is both evident in the illustration and implied in the text – they both have large eyes, which in Malki’s case is also true metaphorically. Further, on the symbolic order, they both seem to embody a liminal, in-betweenness of categories and identities, Malki resides Other than this trait, the contrast between the characterization of the dog and that of Malki herself is glaring. Already in designing her visual representation as “a wonder-dog with wit and independence” the potential of contrasting her with Malki is made clear. The authors display a generosity towards the dog which they withhold from Malki. The dog is everything Malki would like to be. Malki has brown hair, while the story reveals that “the new dog was a true blonde, unlike Malki.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Malki is unsuccessful in her studies, while the dog is not only visually appealing but also smart. The dog is independent and does not get bored, again in contrast with Malki herself. Malki is a mundane character in reality, while the dog enacts the glamorous dream which Malki wants for herself but is denied of.

איור 4 מהספר: **מלכי מונרו מורדוך**

In the above illustration, which appears in the boards of the book, Malki and the dog sit in front of a mirror shimmering in light, taking the appearance of a backstage mirror at a theatre; yet only the dog’s image is reflected, suggesting that Malki does not see herself reflected in her own dream. Malki gives the dog the glamorous Hollywood name of MarilynMonroe Mordoch, so that her initials would be M. M. M., like her own initials but reiterated to reinforce her chances of realizing her Hollywood dream.

*She would draw on all the empty pages the letters M. M. over and over, because if someone wants to be a Hollywood star, it is good that their first name and surname begin with the same letter […] Malki gave the dog an appropriate name: Marilyn Monroe Mordoch. Three M’s increased their chances of making it even more.[[30]](#footnote-30)*

The name chosen for the dog is appropriate for the dream, since it represents the Hollywood success of a famous and glamorous blonde. Malki tries to follow the footsteps of Marilyn Monroe, both in changing her name[[31]](#footnote-31) and in dying her hair. These acts prove fruitless in Malki’s case. Malki remains a *ṡḣordinit* and her attempt to reach the world of glamour proves a failure. Why this is the case is the question at the center of this article’s argument.

Although Malki is the one who attends school, the narrative emphasizes the dog’s intelligence over her own:

*Marilyn was both beautiful and smart. Case in point: when Malki left her phone with Malki for her to call if she needed anything or was missing Malki, Marilyn would look at her and her look showed she understood […] Marilyn never called, because she was very independent[[32]](#footnote-32)*

Because Malki spent many hours at school she would leave the television on for Marilyn, so she would not get bored. As the narrative mentions, the reason for Malki’s many hours of absence was that she attended supplementary classes for students who were not proficient in reading and writing. Malki, who is characterized as lacking in disciplined and practical thinking that could serve her in attaining her goals, is also characterized as being ignorant of her own limitations and educational backwardness, as when she expresses hope to master reading and writing before the broadcasting of the finale of a program called *Who wants to go to Hollywood*.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Malki’s hope is indicative of her character, because the reader recognizes it as being unrealistic. The illustration further invites the reader to position herself in a critical and arguably even condescending relation to Malki by depicting the latter as sleeping through her supplementary classes. The narrative and the illustration reinforce the detraction of her character. Despite the reader being aware of her ethnic background, the illustration erases any visual ethnic identifiers from her depiction, and elicits ridicule and even contempt by showing her sleeping right under sign on the wall reading *If you will it, it is no dream[[34]](#footnote-34)*. This juxtaposition represents a clear statement regarding Malki’s chances of success, and by extension those of Mizrahi inhabitants of the Israeli geographic periphery, in breaking the glass ceiling of success. The illustration clarifies to the reader that success depends on individual virtue, and its absence is testimony of a failure to conform to minimal requirements of personal industry.

איור 5 מהספר: **מלכי מונרו מורדוך**

By this point, the readers are led to develop a sense of superiority over Malki and children like her, a sense which reflects common hegemonic-racialized constructs of “the Mizrahi” as an inferior and marginal position in Israeli society.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Malki’s pedagogical failure enhances the narrative’s diminution of her character, by emphasizing her attempt to enact and Ashkenazified performance while denying her the understanding of her attempts as doomed from the start. This is a racist message which reaffirms primordial, dichotomously-defined ethnic identities whose boundaries allow no blurring or transgression.

Despite her intentions, Malki fails to return home in time to watch her television program. She loses out twice: the opportunity of learning to read and write on one hand, and her chances of participating in the finale and pursuing her dream on the other. The dog, for whom Malki regularly left the television on to stop her from getting bored, ends up winning the competition! Malki hears a conversation between her neighbors:

*What you didn’t watch the finale? That dog won. She must have it going on. She pressed all the right buttons*[[36]](#footnote-36)

איור 6 מהספר: **מלכי מונרו מורדוך**

Malki arrives home just as a pink limousine carries her dog on her way to Hollywood. The dog is about to realize Malki’s dream. At this particular juncture, as we witness the broadcast van carrying the dog, we have no choice but to believe Malki’s fantasy, because we watch the vehicle drive away along with Malki. Three illustrations are dedicated to this single scene. The illustrations depict the excited crowd assembled around the pink limousine, over which a sign hangs or rather “sparkles”[[37]](#footnote-37) as the narrative describes it, reading “Who wants to go to Hollywood?”.[[38]](#footnote-38) The illustration suggests that neighborhood inhabitants of all ages, rather than children and teenagers alone, assembled around the car, conveying the notion that there is no age distinction in the thrill produced from manifestation in reality of the ideal of glamour symbolized by the limousine. We find Malki present in all three scenes, which according to the narrative take place within a few moments. Once Malki reaches the limousine, the limousine retreats as if in panic: *The moment Malki arrived a pink limousine bounced away*.[[39]](#footnote-39)

All three illustrations are presented in frontal perspective. This testifies to the level of involvement of the illustrator in shaping the scene, and effects the level of involvement chosen for the viewers by the illustrator, who places us on the same plane as the illustration.[[40]](#footnote-40) This suggests that the illustrator gives significant weight to this scene and aims to pass along this sense of significance to the viewers. The point in time which the illustration chooses to focus our attention on is the point in which Malki’s dream shatters and moves away from her. The driving away of the limousine is represented in the illustrations using two techniques that amplify the emotional impact of the shattering of the dream: Malki’s position in relation to the viewer and the color palate.

All three illustrations depict Malki from the side or the back, making it difficult for the viewer to empathize with her since her face or eyes are not shown. Viewing Malki from the side or back rather leads us to distance ourselves from the Malki precisely at the most critical narrative juncture for her. The second technique is the color palate. Malki is shown to be wearing entirely pink garb: her dress, the ribbon in her hair, stockings and school bag are all pink. The limousine is also pink. Visual studies indicate that objects depicted with the same color in an illustration develop an associative connection. In our case, the choice of colors enhances the dramatic effect of the limousine, which stands for the realization of Malki’s dream, driving away from her with the dog inside.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The reaction by Malki’s parents to the disappearance of her dog shakes our confidence in the actuality of the scene. The parents make no reference to the dog’s departure for Hollywood, whether because they are unaware of it or because they are alienated from her emotional experience: *The parents told her they could get her another dog, go the first chance they get and choose a nice dog at the shelter [*tza’ar*]*. The term *tza’ar* is a shortening of *tza’ar ba’alei haiym*, or the Israeli Society for Compassion toward Animals. This uncommon shortening represents a further diminution of the parents’ character due to its linguistic foreignness in the text. It is an example of one of the practices of exclusion and silencing of marginalized groups, namely the constructed opposition between the higher linguistic register and grammatic consistency of the hegemony on the one hand, and the corrupt grammatic structure of “street parlance” meant to represent marginalized groups.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Whether Malki’s parents are aware of the dog’s journey to Hollywood or they believe she had simply disappeared, they undoubtedly misunderstand Malki’s imagined reality and the importance she attaches to it. The narrative thus distances Malki’s parents from her emotional world. After a while, Malki receives two postcards in the mail, and she becomes convinced – her alone, unlike her parents, neighborhood friends and schoolmates – that they were sent by her dog from Hollywood.

Malki’s parents and friends doubt her belief in the source of the postcards.

*Malki explained to her mother that she could tell with a hundred percent certainty that it is Marilyn Monroe Mordich, while her mother only said ‘Maybe, it’s unclear.’ The makeup in her eyes made it difficult for her to see clearly. Her father also did not see very clearly, even after he put his glasses on. But Malki could see perfectly. She didn’t wear makeup and didn’t need glasses.[[43]](#footnote-43)*

איור 7 מהספר: **מלכי מונרו מורדוך**

Malki finds in the postcard proof and justification for her expectations, expectations that were accompanied by general inaction. One of the postcards tells her of a television program featuring famous actors. The entire neighborhood arrives the home of the Mordoch family on the intended day, even including the mayor; the presence of the mayor serves to attach an informal atmosphere to narrative’s locale that is a further signal of its class and ethnic marginality. Malki’s own stereotypically Mizrahi characterization is tied to the additional stereotypical trope of a local gathering in a Mizrahi neighborhood. This is evident in the demeaning manner in which the mayor is depicted in both text and illustration - he is characterized as blue-colored and accessible; in the פרודיזציה of the characters donning their finest apparel for the occasion of a television-watching event at their neighbors’ house, the synthetic furs, evening gowns, the one man wearing a white suit and another in leopard-print underwear. The illustration thus marks Malki’s neighborhood as a space where adoration to celebrity culture is uncritical and where the distinction between reality and fiction is blurred. Colton claims that the way the plot constructs its geographic location led her to the conclusion, shared with the author, that the plot must be placed in

*a mental provincial space rather than a particular geographic location. It was clear to me that the fantasy is internal and can happen anywhere. In order to enhance it and give it credibility, it would not be located at a central city, but would take place at any possible province. In a kind of general anonymous prototype of a place of residence, I completely neutralized the issue of the location and made it into a mere signifier.[[44]](#footnote-44)*

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It would seem that the illustrator’s interpretation of a provincial mentality creates an ethnicized visual climate which corresponds with Israeli imaginary of *Mizrahim* as located in geographically and socially peripheral space.

איור 8 מהספר: **מלכי מונרו מורדוך**

As the television program nears at end, with the dog nowhere to be seen, the guests lose their patience and turn to discuss politics. Even uncle Mordoch falls asleep. At the very last moment, when Malki is holding back the tears of her disappointment and after the program’s ending credits, the dog appears on the screen.

*Then, after even the ending credits were done and Malki had no hope left in her, who does she see, quickly passing across the screen? With diamond pins in her hair, pearls and gold on her neck, her nails painted purple polish?[[45]](#footnote-45)*

This depiction of the dog adorned with markers of Hollywood glamour makes a farce out of Malki and her dream. No one else witnesses the dog’s television appearance. We, the readers, see what Malki sees or what she imagines to see, we see the illustration in which the dog flashes through the screen. Does this make us active participants in Malki’s imagination, which transforms in our eyes into a reality? Again, no one believes Malki that the dog did in fact appear on television. Her mother and others around her tell her:

*‘So, you Marilyn never showed up yesterday?’ the kids and school and even just people she met on the street asked her. […] ‘You wish. It’s just your imagination. […] You shouldn’t be sad. It was silly to think Marilyn would be on television to begin with[[46]](#footnote-46)*

Malki remains loyal to her fantasy world and sends a postcard back to her dog in Hollywood:

*On the other side of the postcard she got back then, the one with the notice, she wrote something in big letters, in very clear writing, just like she was taught in the supplementary classes. To Marilyn Monroe Mordoch, in Hollywood, but I did see you[[47]](#footnote-47)*

By the end of the story we realize that the expectation built by the cover illustration would never be realized. The front cover features Malki and her dog dressed in elegant evening gowns like two Hollywood stars, along with Uncle Mordoch in a tuxedo. The back cover features the pink limousine along with the sign reading “Who wants to go to Hollywood?” Yet the story denies the readers the realization of this expectation, since Malki and, arguably, her dog never become stars.

The story responds to the interpretation that conviction has the power to make dreams come true, while at the same time reflecting the approach that unrealistic dreams can never be fulfilled. It shifts its register between the realistic and the fantastical, allowing the readers to choose between the two, and to respond to the question of whether Malki was able to realize her dream through her dog or not. Either way, Malki the girl fails to realize her dream herself, and it remains far out of reach from her mundane reality and her limited personal capabilities.

Malki remains in reality bounded within the private sphere which gives her little power; only in fantasy does she touch upon personal achievement, and even this is not her own achievement but that of her dog, who supposedly gets to inhabit a position of fame in the public sphere. Malki the female protagonist is consistent in defining her dream and in working towards its realization, even if all her efforts fail to advance her or prove useful to her. She is a lone protagonist, who receives no support from her family, friends and neighbors. The narrative dangles her, and the readers along with her, in the gap between a grey reality and a pink dream. In fact, the readers are asked to embrace the internal logic of the plot which leaves Malki in the position assigned to her in the gendered and ethnic order – in the neighborhood and in the private sphere. Malki is twice excluded, once for her gender and again for her ethnic and class-background.

Israeli scholarship has used the concept of exclusion in the feminist context most often in relation to ethnic and national distinctions: Mizrahi vs. Ashkenazi, Israeli vs. Palestinian. The research relates discrimination and alienation to binary societal structures and mechanisms of exclusion, marginalization and control pursued by hegemonic identities.[[48]](#footnote-48) A feminist critique of the book cannot fail to address the issue of Malki’s choice of a subject that personifies her dreams, Marilyn Monroe who was considered a model of beauty and a sex-symbol, sensitive and insecure, a glamorous actress who never received the recognition for her professional achievements. Monroe was subjected both to objectification and to derision for her performance of a liberated sexuality.[[49]](#footnote-49) A feminist critique would seek to examine the question of why a story whose protagonist is female provides her with a dream which reflects binding beauty standards that objectify and oppress women. A Mizrahi-ethnic critique would seek to examine why the narrative places Malki in a Mizrahi-identifies space, not allowing her even in the context of literary fiction to accomplish her dream, transgress the boundaries imposed on her and achieve worldly success, but rather dooms her to her neighborhood-bounded faith. Building on Malki’s characterization, we can interpret her choice of a role model to reflect a commitment to superficial glamour, in line with her personal traits and ethnic background.

**The story is not the Whole Story: Hegemony. Margins. Racism**

My discussion was so far limited to an analysis of the narrative itself. It would be wise at this point to stop and examine what lies beyond it, since the narrative itself does not tell the whole story. The question of the relation between reader and text has been discussed by scholars of literary critique,[[50]](#footnote-50) who have sought to examine whether it is the reader who assigns meaning to the text or the text which shapes the reader’s understanding of the world. The question continues to evade a definite answer. Either way, the text constitutes a site of representation which mediates between reader and reality.

The above reading of the narrative correlates to Barthes’ and Foucault’s position, which denies the author’s authority over her creation, allowing the latter to detach from the context of its production and to serve in the formation of a space of multiple meanings far exceeding that intended for it by the author.[[51]](#footnote-51) Yet even in Barthes’ own writing, the text is a multi-dimensional space feeding on a variety of sources, reflecting both conscious and unconscious, or implicit and explicit, layers. The process of interpretive analysis refers not only to the narrative itself, but also to the alternative paths the author could have taken. The author’s choice, and the meaning it gives rise to, presuppose an entire array of literary, aesthetic, political, social, and other considerations, whether they are explicit or implicit, of her own consciousness which is shaped by the system of values embedded in the cultural space in which she lives and writes. Because the process of interpretive analysis is an examination of the choices made by the author, the answers to question about the choices reflected in the text expand the possible ways of understanding it. It is assumed that, as part of the process of critical analysis of a text, the interpretive framework is enlisted in order to assign meaning to the text in a political, social, ethnic, feminist, post-colonial, and other context.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Hence the above statement that the narrative itself is not the whole story. The story also includes its creators and, in this case, the author and the illustrator. Both were born in Israel and are of Ashkenazi descent; they are considered to be part of the hegemonic canon, and have won numerous awards and other recognition for their work. Their literary work depicts two female characters: a Mizrahi girl and her overly-adorned dog who wears “diamonds […] pearls […] and gold,”[[53]](#footnote-53) a description that is virtually interchangeable with the derogatory term *freḣa*; in other words, they are representatives of Israel’s ethnic and geographic periphery. On the overt level, the story has the outline of a feminist narrative with a female protagonist. Female protagonists in children’s literature are still exceptional enough that any narrative centered around a one would immediately be assumed to reflect a feminist value system.

It appears that the creators of the book, from the perspective of their own position in the social hierarchy, placed Malki the Mizrahi girl from the periphery at center stage in order to mark her otherness and knock her down twice, as an a-priori justification for her incompetence which is inherently built into her ethnic background. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who applies the analytical term “subaltern” to other groups inhabiting the lower echelons of class, gender and ethnic hierarchy, Western women cannot represent subaltern women, since “בבסיס הייצוג הזה ניצבת הבטחה מופרכת לגאולת הסובייקט הקולוניאלי שהצדיקה את המעורבות האימפריאליסטית המוקדמת”.[[54]](#footnote-54) Referring to the manner in which Malki’s identity is constituted, we may also apply Edward Said’s approach, and argue the her identity represents a negative image of the hegemony. The creators thus reaffirm the ideological foundations of ethnic structure in Israel, foundations which draw symbolic boundaries manufactured in Ahskenazi-hegemonic discourse and are commonly hidden from view.[[55]](#footnote-55) In this context, we may pose the question of whether the creators’ approach to Malki’s character may be defined as symbolic violence, along the lines proposed by Bourdieu? Bourdieu described symbolic violence as a vague, imperceptible and arguably unconscious reproduction of inequality in the relation between ethnic categories.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Postcolonial feminists argue that colonial discourse has largely served to posit colonialism as the natural order of things, denying the agency of the women it was applied to, thereby preventing them from acting collectively. Colonial-hegemonic conversations about, and in the name of, marginalized characters does not provide them with a voice, but rather silences them. An additional and complementary argument is that Western feminists writing on “Third World” women demonstrate systemic misunderstandings in their analyses and are in fact complicit with oppressive discursive forms that reflect racism and paternalism. Similar arguments, along with the claim that women of dominant groups serve a role in the oppression of women of disenfranchised groups, constituted the basis for Mizrahi feminism in Israel.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Mizrahi women are trapped between three worlds: the Arab patriarchal world of their countries of origin, the Eurocentric world of a colonialist state and the world of the Jewish religious tradition. In each of these worlds, the women are oppressed into developing incoherent, disjointed identities, learning to see themselves not as they are but through the mirror presented to them by society, a mirror that extenuates ethnic markers.[[58]](#footnote-58) Mizrahi women’s efforts to “beat the system” are diverse; they often experience a sense of inferiority and an unconscious desire to become “White,” a desire constructed and reproduced by a hegemonic society which sanctifies Whiteness.[[59]](#footnote-59) The juxtaposition between Malki’s attempts at success and the opportunities provided to her by the creators of the book is the story beyond that narrative.

**Conclusion**

The article discusses a feminist children’s book whose main protagonist is an active and motivated female character, and sought to examine the fate of that protagonist, characterized as a Mizrahi girl, on the intersection between gender, ethnicity and race, both within the narrative and beyond it. The article presented the many forms of oppression to which the protagonist is subjected, as part of a realistic narrative portrayal. The story presents thematic, linguistic and visual signs of society’s myopia regarding the girl’s dream, and focuses our attention on the blindness of her family, friends and neighbors, who discount her belief that her dog did indeed achieve Hollywood fame. Yet the narrative itself does not attend to its own blindness in relation to the ethnic aspects of the representation of the protagonist, who fails to achieve her dream of breaking out of the boundaries of the gendered and ethnic space which she inhabits. The narrative reaffirms and consolidates a hegemonic worldview based on a gaze that derides Mizrahi identity. None of the reviewers of the book raise its ethnic elements or reference the obvious positioning of the protagonist. This can be explained using Yif’at Biton’s conceptualization of a “dynamic of denial of ethnicity.”[[60]](#footnote-60) The article did not argue for a distancing of Malki’s character from her positioning as Mizrahi, but rather for a freeing of such positioning from its negative connotations. It expresses the hope that Mizrahi girls growing up in the 2000s would no longer be subject to the “steamroller of ethnicization” which, as Kazoom recounts,[[61]](#footnote-61) disenfranchised their grandmothers in the nineteen fifties, damning them to failure.

**מה שהוספתי בצבע כחול אמור להחליף את המקור בעברית (אותו מירקרתי בצהוב ואפשר בסוף למחוק) באותו מקור כמעט שקיים באנגלית**

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1. Someone (usually a female) who is not [naturally](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=naturally) blonde but rather uses a hair-dye to create the appearance of being blonde. [Bottle Blonde's](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Bottle%20Blonde%27s) normally have nasty black re-growth which they seem to think looks [chic](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=chic). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. דנינו-יונה, 2017; דנינו-יונה, 2014; וקסמן ודוידי-בראלי, 2000; תור-גונן, 2004; Nodelman, 2005; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; ; ;Tyler, 1995 ;Banks, 1995 ;Doonan, 1992 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. צריך הפניות פה [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. הפניה לכתיבה ביקורתית על ספרות ילדים. תפרגני פה בהפניות [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ששון-לוי, 2008; שנהב ויונה, 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. אדגר וסדג'וויק, 2007; איגלטון, 2006[1991]; הרציג, 2005; דרידה, 1978; הרצוג, 2017;. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. כזום, 1999; שנהב, 2004; ששון-לוי, 2008; ששון-לוי ושושנה, 2013; שנהב ויונה, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. זרחי, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Young, 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. דנינו-יונה, 2017; פסטה-שוברט, 2000; בלומן, 2005; Pateman, 1989; Young, 1990 ; יזרעאלי, פרידמן, שריפט, רדאי ובובר, 1982 . [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. הכוללת מתחמים מוגבלים במרחב ובזמן ובהם למשל: בית הספר, ההסעה אליו והשכונה. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. pp. 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. p. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ששון לוי ושושנה [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ששון-לוי ושושנה, 2014; פרנקל, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. וולף, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. כל האיורים הם מהספר הנדון במאמר, אלא אם צוין אחרת. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ששון לוי ושושנה טוענים שזהות אתנית שקופה בישראל = זהות אשכנזית. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. p. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. חלוץ, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The term “fiction of ethnic coherence” is proposed by Orna Sasson-Levi and Avi Shoshana to refer to the claimed correlation between ethnic descent, skin color and behavior which creates the illusion of coherence in ethnic identification. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ששון-לוי ושושנה, 2014; הומי באבא, 1994; 2002; Fanon, 1952.; לומסקי-פדר ואחרות, 2010; [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. זיו, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. p. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. דנינו-יונה, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. קולטון, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. p. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. pp. 5-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. From Norma Jean Baker to Marilyn Monroe. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. p. 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. שנהב ויונה, 2008; שירן, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. p. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. pp. 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Kress, & van Leeuwen, 1996 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Chandler, 1998; Kress, & van Leeuwen, 1996; Messaris, 1997; Doonan, 1992 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. פרייד-גלאון, 2015; מוצאפי-האלר, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. p. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. קולטון, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. p. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. pp. 28-29 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. pp. 30-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. שירן, 2007; דהאן-כלב, 2002; כזום, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. עבר-הדני, 1990 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. דה מלאך, 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. בארת, 2005[1968] ; פוקו, 2005[1069]; משעני, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. בארת, 2007 [1957]; מונק, גדרון, קינן, בר-זוהר ושוחט, 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. p. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. שנהב, 2004: 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. ששון-לוי, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. בורדייה, 2007[1998]. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. שירן, 2007; מוהנטי, 2006; ספיבק, 2004; דהן-כלב, 2002; דהן-כלב, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. דהאן-כלב, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. פרנקל, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. ביטון, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. כזום, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)