

## Article

# *Three Mothers* (2006) by Dina Zvi-Riklis: The Repressed Israeli Trauma of Immigration

Yael Munk

Department of Literature, Language and the Arts, The Open University of Israel, Ra'anana 4353701, Israel; munkyael@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** This article relates to the complex approach of Dina Zvi-Riklis' film *Three Mothers* (2006) to immigration, an issue that is central to both the Jewish religion and Israeli identity. While for both, reaching the land of Israel means arriving in the promised land, they are quite dissimilar, in that one is a religious command, while the other is an ideological imperative. Both instruct the individual to opt for the obliteration of his past. However, this system does not apply to the protagonists of *Three Mothers*, a film which follows the extraordinary trajectory of triplet sisters, born to a rich Jewish family in Alexandria, who are forced to leave Egypt after King Farouk's abdication and immigrate to Israel. This article will demonstrate that *Three Mothers* represents an outstanding achievement, because it dares to deal with its protagonists' longing for the world left behind and the complexity of integrating the past into the present. Following Nicholas Bourriaud's radigrant theory, designating an organism that grows roots and adds new ones as it advances, this article will argue that, although the protagonists of *Three Mothers* never avow their longing for Egypt, the film's narrative succeeds in revealing a subversive démarche, through which the sisters succeed in integrating Egypt into their present.

**Keywords:** radigrant theory; immigration trauma; displacement; Israeli cinema; Mizrahi Jews; double occupancy

## 1. Historical Background

In order to address the issue of immigration in Israeli cinema, one should return to the late 19th century, a time which was a unique mixture of modernistic visions of a better future and a strong romantic aspiration for a return to origins. These were the years of European nationalism, but also when Zionism was born, a new ideology that regarded the ingathering of Jewish men and women from all over the world as its highest achievement. However, like all high ideals, the one of Zionist ideology did not reach everyone; a substantial number of immigrants arrived in the State of Israel only after its establishment in 1948, as a result of historical events that prevented them from continuing to live in their native countries. This was the case of most European Jews who could not envisage returning to their native land after the horrors of the Holocaust, as well as the vast majority of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East (often referred to as *Mizrahim*),<sup>1</sup> who faced antisemitic reactions and forced exile after the establishment of the State of Israel. Israel soon became a "Jews' National Home", and by its very name, attracted many Jews living under unstable regimes (some of them colonial regimes) to come and settle in their new land. One way or another, the newborn country of Israel was soon home to hundreds of thousands of displaced Jewish immigrants who had considerable difficulty adjusting to their new world.

<sup>1</sup> The Mizrahi issue is crucial for the understanding of today's Israel. For more information, see (Shenhav 2006).

Zionism aspired to create a better future for the Jewish people, i.e., the establishment of their national home and the idea of the return to the sources suggested that this return would be the final stage of a natural flow from past to future, for a better cosmic order. However, the Zionist implementation of this mixture of modernistic and romantic ideologies was to be confronted by many difficulties, since not all the newcomers shared the same ideology. While for some, the suffering of displacement was the natural price to be paid in order to gain independence, for others, reaching the promised land was only the fulfillment of a messianic promise, which explains the choice of the mystical word “Aliyah” (ascension) for immigration.

One of the difficulties that the nascent state faced was the implementation of the ‘melting pot’ policy, intended to blur the ethnic division between occidental (Ashkenazi) Jews and oriental (Mizrahi and Sephardic) Jews. However, in practice, for most Jewish newcomers from East and West, coming to Israel represented the return to the land of their forefathers, an act which was attributed to this closure after two thousand years of exile an extra value. This magic religious appeal was attributed to “Aliyah”, the act of immigration which, in its most common meaning, implied leaving one’s land, culture and friends for another country whose nature was yet unknown. Therefore, one can easily recognize that the Israeli act of immigration was different from any other similar act around the world.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it was the inevitable result of centuries of religious craving to return to Israel (as expressed in the famous Jewish expression “Next year in Jerusalem”), presented to the newcomers as a very special, spiritual act that was to form and reinforce the individual’s inner self. Moreover, since it was such an enriching experience, a longing for the world left behind was not legitimated.

## 2. A Very Brief Historiography of Israeli Cinema

Nowadays, more than seventy years after the establishment of the State of Israel, certain artists—filmmakers included—dare express their longing for a past that was taken away from their parents, and by extrapolation, from themselves.<sup>3</sup> This nostalgia, accompanied by the need to revisit and re-evaluate the price individuals had to pay in order to conform to the expectations of their new state, has become central in many Israeli feature and documentary films, such as Ze’ev Revah’s *A Bit of Luck* (*Tipat Mazal*, 1992) and Eytan Fox’s *Walk on Water* (*Lalechet Al HaMaim*, 2004).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, though none of these films deny the benefits of immigration to Israel, most of them finally address the once imposed obliteration of their past, and revisit the trauma of their displacement and immigration, in order to come to terms with a world that once was. However, one should not confuse this position with nostalgia, whose etymology hints at the impossible combination of homecoming (nostos) and pain (algos): being fully aware of the changes that occurred in their native countries, these immigrants do not wish to reinstate their lives there, but only to peek for a moment and return safely home, an act that confirms the acknowledgment of their displacement.

Two major contemporary scholars, Laura Marks and Hamid Naficy, have investigated the issue of displacement in postmodern cinematic culture. In her book, *The Skin of the Film*, Marks (2000) introduces the concept of intercultural cinema and explores how embodied memories are represented in films. She focuses specifically on senses and their relation to memory. For Marks, intercultural cinema is “a movement insofar as it is the emerging expression of a group of people who share the political issue of displacement and hybridity, though their individual circumstances vary widely” (Marks 2000, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> See Raz-Krakotzkin’s (2007) *The Negation of Exile*. According to Raz-Krakotzkin, the negation of exile by the Zionist movement is not the negation of different forms of Jewish existence over the course of history, but the negation of its historicity. It comes from the desire to define the collectivity of the Jews as a national collectivity in the modern sense of the term, to present Jewish history as a national history, and to write the national history of the Jews. However, writing the history of the Jews as victors means isolating this history from the context the Jews lived in. In other words, the history would mean the de-historization of the Jews.

<sup>3</sup> This issue is largely discussed in Marianne Hirsch’s research, especially in her book (Hirsch 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Many Israeli films feature the issue of immigration as their premise, but only a few of them, and only recently, have dared to regard that crucial event as traumatic. For a long time, the ideological aspect of the act of immigration masked its pain.

Naficy's book, *Accented Memories* (2001), follows this line of thought, and is concerned with a wide range of directors who share one common characteristic: they are displaced from their home country and culture. Naficy's argument is that the memories of home and the conditions of their home countries are what accentuated their films. Therefore, the accent "emanates not so much from the accented speech of diegetic characters as for the displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes" (Naficy 2001, p. 4). These two tendencies are clearly combined in contemporary Israeli cinema that, as opposed to the past, dares to deal with the issue of displacement and its various consequences.

This change in Israeli cinema's approach to the issue of immigration began under the influence of the massive immigration from the former USSR during the 1990s, that completely re-structured the Israeli demographic infrastructure, as can be seen in films such as Arik Kaplun's *Yana's Friends* (*HaHaverim Shel Yana*, 1999). In Israeli cinema of the 1990s, arriving in Israel no longer meant reaching home. A more distant and sometime opportunistic approach enabled Jews to come to Israel, as a first step toward a better world. Consequently, the approach to immigration began to change. Cinema scholar Raz Yosef describes the experience of migration as based on mourning and melancholia, writing that "when a person leaves his country of birth, he has a wide range of things over which to grieve, such as loss of family, language, identity, standing in the community, and assets" (Yosef 2016, p. 164). In the 1990s, this was no longer considered an inescapable fact of life. Against this background, Dina Zvi-Riklis' postmodern approach to immigration to Israel, as a reversible and contestable choice, is portrayed in her melodrama *Three Mothers* (*Shalosh Imahot*, 2006), representing a turning point in Israeli cinema.

### 3. *Three Mothers* on the Background of the Immigration Theme in Israeli Cinema

For Israeli cinema, the issue of immigration was a central theme during its formative years. Whether because it coincided with the dominant ideological narrative or because it could create some humoristic situations (not only those based on language deformations, but also on general misunderstanding), the fact is that the new country provided a safe ground for its first ideological narratives. However, this tendency did not last for long, and already in the early sixties, sixteen years after the establishment of the Jewish State, a young filmmaker named Uri Zohar created his first surrealistic feature film, *A Hole in the Moon* (*Hor BaLevana*, 1964), comparing the entire establishment of the new state to a Hollywood cinematic production, in which the new conquered land was a huge studio with a variety of locations. However, this exceptional film was followed by a series of popular comedies also known as *Bourekas Cinema*,<sup>5</sup> which portrayed conflict situations that the ethnic melting pot of those years of mass immigration was expected to resolve. This immigration narrative was to be replaced in the following decades by politically critical narratives that dared revisit not only the settling of Jews in the Promised Land (as in Uri Barabash's *Once We Were Dreamers* [*HaHolmim*, 1987]), but also the very issue of the land which was and is still inhabited by Palestinians. Towards the end of the century, the issue of immigration slowly disappeared, as if indicating its irrelevance to today's Israel. Step by step, it was replaced by migrant films and diasporic cinema, as defined by Naficy and Marks, two complementary notions that are central to this article.

*Three Mothers* proposes a complex cinematic narrative of displacement and immigration that can be addressed through Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of "the Radicant" (Bourriaud 2009). According to Bourriaud, the post-postmodern text has to be thought of in a social political context. It differs from previous texts because it takes into account the recipient's standpoint in a system that allows for an exchange of human relations and ideas. This new period, that Bourriaud chooses to call "Altermodernism", becomes a means of displaying new globalized cultures that replace the Western

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<sup>5</sup> Bourekas cinema is the name of a popular Israeli cinematic genre that appeared in the mid-sixties of the previous century, focusing on comedies inspired by the inherent tension between the different ethnicities—in broad strokes, Ashkenazi (European Jews) and Mizrahi (Oriental Jews)—that came to populate the young State of Israel.

foundations trumpeted in the modern era. This is a new configuration, in which nationalism has lost ground, borders are being crossed and cities have replaced states. Moreover, in this new configuration, immigration is no longer a definitive process, a point of no return, but rather reflects the possibility of living between two worlds that now implies no contradiction. According to Bourriaud, this tendency works toward the reconstruction of a new modernity, whose strategic task would be to strive for the dissolution of the postmodern globalizing tendency. This démarche entails, first and foremost, inventing a theoretical tool with which to combat everything in postmodern thought, that in practice supports the trend towards standardization inherent in globalization. In other words, Bourriaud proposes that we rethink the postmodernist notion of immigration and to translate it into nomadism.

On the basis of a sociological and historical reality—the era of migratory flows, global nomadism, and the globalization of financial and commercial flows—a style of living and thinking is emerging that allows one to fully inhabit that reality instead of enduring or resisting it by means of inertia. (Bourriaud 2009, p. 52)

This approach differs dramatically from all previous ties to geographical past and promotes the “altermodern” idea of nomadism. According to Braidotti (2012), nomadism, with all its different forms of mobility, is one of the key ethical challenges of today’s critical theory and consists of a form of preferring subjectivity over the always dominant hegemonic hierarchies, choosing to always be in a process of becoming. Obviously, in such a conjuncture, there is but very little space for nostalgia and the subjective nature of trauma rules. Moreover, whereas nostalgia is located in a remote idyllic past that one tends to cherish, trauma belongs to a repressed painful past that tends to reappear unexpectedly against one’s will.

However, in contemporary transnational cinema,<sup>6</sup> it seems that migration cinema has succeeded in finding in subjectivity a way to combine these two seemingly incompatible notions and create a unique fusion that enables their co-existence, thereby evoking the past in the present without excessive sentimentality. In his influential book *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai wrote that the late twentieth century’s global turn is due to “a theory of rupture that takes media and migration as its two major, and interconnected, diacritics and explores their joint effect on ‘the work of imagination’ as a constitutive feature in modern subjectivity” (Appadurai 2005, p. 3). Accordingly, these films, directed in times of migration and globalization, tend to blur the boundaries between spaces and times and create a deterritorializing identification that depends on new conceptions of home, community, and the nation (Bertellini 2013).

Having clear repercussions on the individual’s identity, displacement and immigration find their way in the individual’s psyche, in what cultural researcher Thomas Elsaesser names “double occupancy”, that is a new identity typical of the twentieth century colonial states, an identity born of exile and border crossing. Elsaesser contends that the cinema of double occupancy has emerged in response to the crisis of the nation-state, and the growing significance of multiple and often conflicting allegiances which ‘hyphenated members of [a] nation’ (Elsaesser 2005, p. 118) experience. Those hyphenated identities include immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers, who live within their own diasporic communities and closed family or faith circles, cut off from the social fabric at large through lack of familiarity with either language, or culture, or both. Moreover, sub-nationals, in their allegiance, are sections of the second-generation diaspora. While sharing the language and possessing the skills to navigate their society, they nonetheless do not feel that they have a stake in maintaining the social fabric, sensing themselves to be excluded or knowing themselves to be discriminated against, while also having become estranged from the nation of their parents. In the best of cases, where they have found the spaces that allow them to negotiate difference, they are what might be called hyphenated

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<sup>6</sup> Transnational cinema is defined as a cinema that does not necessarily reflect the nation-state in which it was made, due to a series of different financial aids that come from other countries, and by definition influence the contents and messages of the film text.

members of the nation, or hyphenated nationals. The hyphenated identity can come from a double occupancy, which here functions as a divided allegiance, to the nation-state into which they were born, and to the homeland from which (one or both of) their parents came (Elsaesser 2005, p. 118).

Filmmaker Dina Zvi-Riklis' biography already provides the preconditions for accented cinema. Born in Israel to a family who immigrated from Iraq, Zvi-Riklis' work is often related to her personal experience as a second generation to displacement. Her first feature film *Kurdania* (*Kurdania*, 1984) dealt precisely with the experience of living in a temporary camp during Israel's formative years. This issue was not further developed in other films that she directed—except for her latest documentary mini-series *The Transit Camps* (*Maabarot*, 2019)—but remained as subtext which transforms all her films—features and documentaries—into accented cinema. The film on which this article focuses, *Three Mothers*, proposes a narrative that follows the extraordinary trajectory of triplet girls born in Alexandria; personal circumstances—the mother's death—as well as historical circumstances, lead to them leaving the homeland. The three spoiled young women move to Tel Aviv, apparently with no particular difficulties. They reappear on screen years later, as teenagers living side by side with a weak and silent father (see Figure 1). While the dominant sister, Rose, decides to develop a singing career and succeeds, the two other sisters follow her silently and assist as much as they can, always keeping in mind the special alliance that was given to them at their birth—being together. The three marry in a triple wedding ceremony and Rose gives birth to her daughter Ruha, while Yasmin gives birth to twin boys. The third sister, Flora, discovers that she is barren and, as an act of generosity, Yasmin decides to give over one of her twins to Flora, as was customary in Egypt. One fatal evening, as Egyptian president Anwar Sadat delivers his historical speech at the Israeli parliament, the Israeli social services knock on the door and take the twin brothers to a foster family. This is the first rupture in the family, which will be followed by numerous ones. When Rose's husband finds out that his wife has been unfaithful to him, he decides to emigrate with his family to Miami. At the last moment, Flora realizes that he was responsible for reporting her to the social services, and decides to take revenge. One afternoon, as the family is packing for its immigration to Miami, the husband suffers a sudden respiratory distress, and searches in vain for his breathing aide, which had been hidden by Yasmin. He dies and the sisters' beautiful alliance ceases to exist. The sisters will reunite on screen many years later, still living in their late father's apartment and now facing Yasmin's threatening medical condition. In their search for a kidney transplant, Rose organizes a last performance in order to raise the funds for a surgery abroad and the three return to Alexandria; there, Yasmin will undergo the surgery that ends in her death. The film ends as Ruha, Rose's daughter, learns that she is pregnant with her first child.



**Figure 1.** Dina Zvi-Riklis, *Three Mothers* (*Shalosh Imaot*, 2006), Adolescence in Israel. Credit: Yoni Hamenachem. Used with the director's permission.



*Three Mothers* should be read as an attempt to work through the mourning process that had not occurred (or was at least not represented on screen) upon the family's departure from Egypt. In this sense, the sisters' departure from Egypt should be read as a traumatic deterritorialization event that the narrative refuses to acknowledge as such. It thus evolves into a repressed post-traumatic stress response (PTSD) that underlies the sisters' actions throughout the narrative. This syndrome, that shares many similarities with the post traumatic response of second-generation Holocaust survivors, does not disappear naturally, but rather requires in-depth processing, as Zvi-Riklis' film compellingly demonstrates.

In Tzi-Riklis' film, deterritorialization functions as a transformative experience, but this experience gets more precise as the sisters evolve in the Israeli present. It is obvious that Egypt is a remote memory, but without mentioning it, the sisters feel attached to this land they left many years ago. Having said that, they refuse to maintain an idealized image of the past, as is the case with many other Israeli films; documentary and feature films such as the above-mentioned Ze'ev Revah's *A Bit of Luck* and Eytan Fox's *Walk on Water*. The latter fiction films take their heroes to a confrontation on their past's repressed land, thus creating a subversive border crossing between past and present that the protagonists longed for. However, in *Three Mothers*, the return to Egypt is not intentional. Without their sister's medical condition, the three may have never returned to their homeland and would have continued to cherish a personal memory of their past. However, when the opportunity to return to Egypt occurs, they take it with both hands. Suddenly, it is only natural to return to the landscapes of their childhood, that turns out to not be so different from the place that they live nowadays.

#### 4. Migrant Films and Diasporic Cinema: The Case of *Three Mothers*

In his article "Cinema and Migration", cultural researcher Anton Kaes points at the resemblance between film and migration.

By its very emphasis on movement and motion and the fleeting moment, film articulates more accurately than other media the displacement resulting from itinerancy and migration. Film images continually cross-national boundaries, challenge the coordinates of space and time, and construct representations of a nomadic and unstable state of existence that has become the signature of modernity. (Kaes 1998, p. 101)

The term "Migrant Film" refers to the cinematic work of first-generation migrants who are able to draw directly on their experiences of exile, migration, the asylum process, and displacement. It is not a new genre: migrants have been involved at all levels of the film industry since its inception.<sup>7</sup> Diasporic films are those films directed and produced by second and subsequent generations of the children and grandchildren of migrants, rather than by those who migrated themselves. These films typically deal with identity, marginalization, conflict, and inter-generational debates about values, behavior, loyalty and shared memories. Turkish German, North African French, and Black and Asian British filmmakers, employing this genre, have played an important role in revitalizing contemporary European cinema.<sup>8</sup> According to this cinematic narrative, Jews arrived in Israel, dispossessed of their cultural assets. The country gave them some basic tools for their initial stages of adaptation, and from that point on, they had to learn to create their own path in society. By virtue of its refusal to show the protagonists' previous life in the diaspora, Israeli cinema collaborated with the Zionist ideological eradication of the past. At the verge of the third millennium, Israeli cinema, inspired by world cinema, finally accepted the notion of diaspora, as well as the diasporic state of mind and melancholy.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For example, Yiddish filmmakers in the early days of silent films created an ethnic cinema, in which they expressed themselves in the language and culture of their dispersed communities, whereas a later generation of Jewish migrants—professional émigrés exiled from Germany in 1930s—was assimilated into the wider cultures of Hollywood and European cinema.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, (Loshitzky 2010).

<sup>9</sup> On the Freudian concept of mourning and melancholia as applied to Israeli cinema, see (Yosef 2011).

Zvi-Riklis's film *Three Mothers* entertains a special dialogue with the immigration narrative which was so central in previous Israeli film texts. It may be because of a certain sensitivity developed with the immigration of the filmmaker's parents to Israel, as she herself attested in an interview with *Haaretz* correspondent Nirit Anderman:

The lives of immigrants are lives of missed opportunity, with a sort of bitterness, and I assume that this is why I repressed it. But, of course, it doesn't help, because it is something that seeps down into you; it is assimilated in the genetic imprint. I didn't want to be the daughter of the embittered, poor immigrants who missed their lives. I very much wanted to fight it, but the fact is that it appears in all of my films. (Anderman 2012)

*Three Mothers* opens with a long shot on the seashore of Alexandria, accompanied by the caption "Alexandria, 1942". A series of close ups on different objects follows—silver cutlery, oriental pastry and a large amount of apricots and dates piled one upon the other, all displayed on a golden plate on an embroidered map, metonymically representing the protagonists' wealth. It then shows the celebration around the birth of female triplets all named after flowers: Rose, Flora and Yasmin; an event so extraordinary that King Farouk himself comes to bless the family. On this occasion, the mother, the father, the King and the babies are photographed and this photograph will follow them for more than fifty years and will remain the evidence of their noble origins. As one of the sisters says, "having been blessed by the King makes us princesses."

Despite the emphasis on the family's wealth, the idyllic life of the Hakim family is suddenly interrupted by two tragedies: the first, of a personal nature, is the mother's death during the typhus epidemic; the second, of a national historical nature, the King's abduction and the resulting deterioration of the Jews' social status. This necessitated their emigration from Egypt to Western countries—an option that was relevant only for those Jews holding a European passport—or to Israel, where the passport issue was irrelevant, since from its very first days, Israel applied the Law of Return.<sup>10</sup> The narrative neither reveals the family's hesitation regarding their destination, nor provides information regarding their first years in Israel; in fact, it skips an entire decade, leading the viewer to the city of Tel Aviv, where the father owns a spice shop. His daughters are now teenagers speaking fluent Hebrew. Egypt for them is a distant memory. Inspired by the French-Egyptian singer, Dalida, the eldest daughter Rose, who has always been the dominant and extroverted of the three, is trying to create for herself a career as a singer. She secretly sings in a night club and enjoys considerable success. However, this behavior contradicts the traditional education the father attempts to give his daughters, which leads to inevitable confrontations. The most dramatic incident takes place one night in Tel Aviv, as the other triplets help Rose get ready for her show (see Figure 2). When the father approaches the room, threatening Rose that he will not let her appear in dubious bars, the three daughters close the door and prevent his entrance. This is the first act of rebellion, an act that could not have taken place in Egypt or if their mother had still been alive.

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<sup>10</sup> The law of return (Hebrew: Hok HaShvut) is an Israeli law passed on 5 July 1950, which grants Jews from anywhere in the world the right to come and live in Israel and to gain Israeli citizenship. In the Law of Return, the State of Israel gave effect to the Zionist movement's "credo", which called for the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state. In 1970, the right of entry and settlement was extended to people with at least one Jewish grandparent and to individuals married to a Jew.



**Figure 2.** Dina Zvi-Riklis, *Three Mothers* (*Shalosh Imaot*, 2006), The Three Sisters as Young Women. Credit: Yoni Menachem. Used with the director's permission.

The absence of the mother—which might also be read as the absence of the motherland—is felt in other domains as well. When the daughters begin to date, they feel insecure, but do not know whom they should address. Though their father is doing his best at work and at home, this is apparently not enough. Moreover, the sisters maintain a united front against the father's authority and against his conservative world. The relationship does not improve much, until the three marry young men from their neighborhood in a triple wedding (see Figure 3), making the widowed father smile for the first time. The triplets maintain their close relationship and continue to live much as they had before they married. Surprisingly, until their marriage, the three do not manifest any sign of longing for their lost country.



**Figure 3.** Dina Zvi-Riklis, *Three Mothers* (*Shalosh Imaot*, 2006), Rose's Wedding. Credit: Yoni Hamenachem. Used with the director's permission.

In fact, *Three Mothers* seems to conceal any hint of difficulty. Although the marriages are not as happy as they anticipated, none of the sisters complain. They think that as long as they are together, nothing can break them. At least this is what they believe. Rose gets pregnant first and gives birth to her daughter, Ruha, the dominant child, who becomes the keeper of the mothers' memory,



as she establishes a video company in which the elderly come to give testimony of their past for the next generations. This enables the three mothers to come and reveal their part in the family's narrative, parts which reveal and conceal the secrets of a seemingly happy life. On the cinematic level, Ruha's occupation enables the creation of a fragmentary narrative the covers almost forty years.

The second sister to give birth is Yasmin, who finds out that she is expecting twins. At this same moment, Flora discovers that she is barren. Since the sisters bear an unwritten pact between them, according to which they will support each other in all conditions, Yasmin decides to give one of her twins to her sister—so that the symmetry between the sisters will remain, and each of them will hold a child. Giving away one of her twins is an unusual act. However, the sisters carry a vague memory of this Egyptian custom and convince their husbands that this is the right thing to do. In fact, this is only the return of the repressed diaspora. A more concrete event that symbolizes this return takes place a few years later, at a historical moment, as Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat is invited to give a speech at the Israeli parliament (Knesset). This unprecedented event is crucial for the sisters, who suddenly witness the representative of their beloved country accepted by the State of Israel as a friend, and not as an enemy. Considered as one of the earliest Israeli media events ([Dayan and Katz 1994](#)), it is broadcast live, and the three sisters and their husbands and children watch the President's speech with great excitement. However, as they attentively watch the miraculous television broadcast, someone knocks at the door and the spell is broken. The moment of suture between the lost native country of Egypt and the family's new home country, Israel, symbolized by Saadat's visit, is suddenly disrupted. It turns out that the Israeli welfare authorities have been informed about the informal adoption of Yasmin's twin by her sister and have decided to take him away to a foster family. The identity of the informant is not revealed, but just like the sisters, the viewer understands that it was Rose's husband, who strongly opposed the "primitive" habits the sisters brought with them from Egypt, and even more than that, the sisters "covering" for Rose's affairs. After the twin brother is taken to a foster family, the pact between the sisters is severely impaired and Rose seems to give up hope for suture and decides to follow her husband and leave Israel for a third, neutral country, the United States of America.

The sisters gather again, this time to help Rose pack her apartment. However, an unexpected incident prevents the sisters from separating as planned. Rose's husband realizes that he cannot find his inhalation medicine and he actually suffocates to death in front of the sisters' eyes. After this traumatic event, Rose realizes she will never reach Miami and the narrative again skips a number of years, letting the viewer assume that the sisters led a normal life together in their father's apartment in Tel Aviv. When they reappear on screen, the dynamics between the three have seemingly not changed: Rose has remained dominant, although she does not perform as a singer anymore; the two others' personalities are more subdued and distant. However, the occasion of the viewer's reunion with the sisters is the sad announcement that Yasmin has been diagnosed with a serious ailment that requires an urgent heart transplant surgery abroad. Since this is a complex and expensive operation, the sisters try to figure out how they can meet the expense, and Rose, who has not sung since her husband's death, decides to organize a fundraiser concert. The concert sells more tickets than expected and the sisters decide to travel to Alexandria and have the surgery there. Thus, against all odds, they have returned home. Furthermore, in this case, home is where the heart (to be transplanted) is. Lying on the operating table, Rose sees her dead mother approach her, kissing her face. The two remaining sisters understand that they had reached the end of their journey. They return home to Tel Aviv, where Ruha, Rose's daughter, had just learned that she is pregnant. Apparently, the sisters' intensive journey was necessary, in order to come to terms with their past.

## 5. The Time Gaps as Designating Imposed Remembering

As mentioned above, on two occasions, the script of *Three Mothers* skips very large timespans. The first is when the family arrives in Tel Aviv from Alexandria. These first years in their new country should have been very significant for the triplets; changing habits and manners, not to mention the need to learn a new language. However, when we meet the sisters again after the immigration, time has

passed, and they are already young teenagers in a Tel Aviv apartment, resembling any other Tel Aviv teens. In other words, the filmmaker has chosen not to present the trauma of displacement on screen, but rather relate to the frivolous nature of young women. The second time is at least as dramatic; after the death of Rose's husband, the sisters are compelled to reorganize their lives, and decide to make an unconventional choice—to return and live in their father's house. Again, the dramatic period that characterizes their change of status from married to single, widowed or divorced, is not mentioned in any way. As was the case with the earlier time gap, the trauma is perceived as imperceptible. When the viewers meet the sisters again, they are mature ladies living together in their father's apartment. If not for Flora's disease, the narrative would not have had any reason to return to them. However, these two gaps in the narrative make the untold more important than what is actually reported. These post-traumatic years, during which they learned to live as young women and then as older single women, have a decisive influence on the course of their lives. In fact, they remind us that trauma took place, but was not treated properly in real time, and these cheerful sisters are in fact post traumatic.

Accordingly, two major traumas reside at the heart of the narrative of *Three Mothers*: the first being the forced emigration from Egypt to Israel, and the second—the loss of one sister's child under the State's imposed rules of adoption. Interestingly, these traumas, as painful as they are, are not discussed at any point. Rather, they haunt the sisters' lives, preventing them from living a fully serene present. Therefore, the attempt to provide a normal life framework deletes the post traumatic years from the narrative, leaving the narrative structure incomplete. Only towards the film's end, as the sisters return to Alexandria for a medical procedure, will the second-generation immigrants be provided closure for a scar that could not be healed in real time. Despite their good nature, the titular three mothers have only few moments of joy and tend to save them for themselves, fearing that another catastrophe would befall them. However, the temporal structure of the narrative seems to hint that one cannot escape destiny, and that catastrophe might find one wherever one hides. This is why the first sequence opens with the announcement that Yasmin suffers from an aggressive disease requiring an urgent transplant.

## **6. Longing for the Land of Exile and the Symbolic Role of the Egyptian-Italian-French Singer Dalida in the Film Text**

The particular place that Alexandria holds in the narrative is worthy of special attention. First rejected and ignored by the protagonists as representing the world of exile, it returns toward the end as a symbol of closure and reconciliation. As one of the sisters says as they travel along the seashore, "this is the same sea". In other words, emigration has not taken them to faraway places; it has left them in the same cultural and geographical milieu. However, this thought is not voiced at the beginning of the narrative. It can be voiced only after the sisters have experienced the return to the long-repressed place of birth. As long as the sisters attempt to integrate into their new society, the landscapes left behind are not mentioned, for fear of ruining the integration process. They are discussed again only when the sisters feel they have become part of their new world. As opposed to the issue of landscape, the issue of language is constantly characterized by hybridity. The colonial situation into which the sisters were born, a situation combining Arabic and French while living in Egypt, becomes more complex once Hebrew was added upon their arrival to Israel and they found themselves juggling with three languages. Interestingly, the sisters tend to speak French with each other, and later, when in Israel, they combine these languages with Hebrew. This language blurring is emphasized in the narrative through the symbolic mention of the Egyptian-Italian-French singer Dalida.

In fact, all through *Three Mothers*, the sisters listen to the songs of the French-Italian-Egyptian singer Dalida (born in Egypt under the name Yolanda Gigliotti). More than an artistic model, Dalida soon turns into a cultural signifier that helps the sisters in coping with their complex colonial origins. Indeed, like any other detail in the screenplay, the choice of Dalida is no coincidence. The famous singer is the epitome of the post-colonial subject's blurred identity, which, according to Elsaesser, operates on the double occupancy pattern. This pattern designates loyalty to two different, and at times

contradictory, ideological poles. Born in Egypt to a Christian family of Italian origin, Dalida evolved in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual milieu. Therefore, she never felt alienated from the place, and varied her subjective position according to the changes in her surrounding dominant culture. This situation was to change when Dalida was encouraged to travel to Paris and was given a chance to use her many talents as an actress, a singer, and a performer. Indeed, after leaving Egypt and her family, Dalida became an extraordinary star in the Mediterranean countries and worldwide. It is therefore not surprising that she is adopted as a role model by the most extravagant triplet, Rose. Considering that the sisters follow Rose in her artistic enterprise, their decision to address a non-Jewish role model should be considered as more than an adolescent rebellion against their father; it is an affirmation of their hybrid identity. Just like Dalida, who was a Christian singer of Egyptian-French-Italian origin, they are Israeli girls of Egyptian-Jewish origins who were born in Alexandria, but now happen to live in Tel Aviv. In other words, Dalida, the femme fatale, is not only a source of inspiration for their femininity—as one could easily deduce—but also a source of inspiration for their multi-national identity, a new kind of identity that came into being after the end of colonialism and at the dawn of new independent states, among them, Israel. Dalida's melancholy song, "*C'est l'histoire d'un amour*" (literally, "it is a story of a love"), performed twice in the course of the narrative, does not refer to a particular lover, but rather to a land and a place which now belong to a distant past.

As mentioned above, Dalida serves as a role model for Rose, the most ambitious sister. In the early years of her career, she secretly performs in small cabarets, singing Dalida's songs in French and Arabic, to which she adds her translation into Hebrew. However, as her success grows, she turns into a femme fatale who is being courted by many, one of them her future husband. Although Rose marries her suitor, she still believes that her destiny should take her to better places and experiences a kind of frustration when confronting her mediocre life. One of the obsessive thoughts is that, had she remained in Alexandria, in her native Levantine culture, her life could have been much better and her career more successful. These thoughts bring Rose to an ever-lasting frustration that will be solved only towards one of the film's final sequences, when years after she had renounced her singing career, she organizes her concert to raise money for her sister's surgery. Not only is the concert a success, it also provides an opportunity to close loose ends from the past. The men of her life—her sisters' husbands—come to listen to her, and she is again surrounded by suitors, just like she wanted her life to be as a young woman. For one night, she returns to be the femme fatale, the woman at whose feet men fall. When this fantasy is finally achieved, she comes to acknowledge her age and her displacement, two parameters that will nourish the rest of her life.

## 7. The Mizrahi Jew and the Issue of Exile

Finally, one should mention the generational issue and the role it plays in the film text. Various researchers have investigated the differences between the first and second generation to immigration. In the case of Israeli cinema, both Yosef (2016) and Alush-Levron (2015) pointed out the specific combination of mourning and melancholia that characterizes the Israeli second generation of Mizrahi/Sephardi immigration (Alush-Levron 2015, pp. 171–72). Their contention is that, while this generation never experienced the land of diaspora, they are still emotionally related to it. Generally speaking, they discover that the trauma continues to exist in the second generation, even when the immigrants' children had never seen the land of diaspora. This is the reason that imagination plays an important role in the reconstitution of the past and, at times, confounds past and present in exceptional fantastic constellations that tend to embellish the past at the expense of verisimilitude. The question, then, is why so many artists allow themselves to fall into the trap of nostalgia, a trap that, as mentioned above, relies on mourning and melancholia (Yosef 2016). This issue becomes particularly crucial when people experience an irreversible rupture, as in the case of the Mizrahi/Sephardi Jews who left their countries of origin in order to immigrate to Israel, knowing that they would never be able to return. Moreover, once in Israel, they became aware that their culture of origin, the Arab culture, was identified with the enemy and they were facing a serious loyalty dilemma concerning the preservation of their

past, at least in the public sphere. As Shohat (1997, p. 47) puts it: “[upon arrival in the State of Israel] the Sephardi Jew was prodded to choose between anti-Zionist ‘Arabness’ and pro-Zionist ‘Jewishness.’ For the first time in the Arab-Jewish history, Arabness and Jewishness were posed as antonyms”. The denied Arab nature of part of Israel’s population remained an unspoken secret until recently, when it reappeared under the critical sociological category known as the “Arab Jews”.<sup>11</sup> In the revised edition of her book *East/West and the Politics of Representation* (2009), Shohat returns to the issue of Mizrahim in Israeli cinema. In her view, discrimination has not disappeared, but she smartly notes that “[h]ybrid identities cannot be reduced to a fixed recipe; rather they form a changing repertory of cultural modalities. Occupying social and discursive spaces, the Mizrahi identity, like all identities, are dynamic and mobile, less an achieved synthesis than an unstable constellation of discourses” (Shohat 2013, p. 34).

It seems that the extraordinary voyage of the Hakim triplets from Egypt to Israel and then back to Egypt, only to return again to Israel as a twosome, represents a unique case of going back and forth between Israel and the diaspora. As mentioned in this article’s introduction, Israeli cinema was rather reluctant to portray the world left behind, since immigration was the Jews’ ultimate goal after years of persecution. While this may be true, the sentimental attachment to the land of origin may at times be less rational. A person longs for the landscape of her childhood, and this has nothing to do with rational thoughts. The Hakim sisters, like many other new immigrants, realize that the longing for the land left behind is contrary to the national ideology, and unconsciously repress their images and feelings for Alexandria. At two instances, this repressed memory is revived, always in tragic circumstances. In the first instance, the twin brother is taken away from his aunt. In the second, the threesome is ruptured, as one sister dies. The film does not adopt the hegemonic vision that completely bans the past. On the contrary, it designates these two traumatic instances as moments of deep transformation, of actively accepting the past and becoming an ambivalent character, rather than accepting the past without complaint. In fact, one may say that, although already Israelis, the triplets opt for Bourriaud’s radican option, never surrendering to the hegemonic law, and looking for ways to integrate the past into the present.

## 8. Conclusions

While the act of immigration is not represented on screen, the sisters’ trauma of displacement plays a decisive role in the narrative and forms a considerable component in their life decisions. In this context, one can understand that their behavior is no longer a reflection of spoiled young women’s caprices but rather, a need to compensate for a rich and colorful childhood, of which they were deprived too soon.

It is therefore no coincidence that the film ends on the two remaining sisters returning to Israel after travelling to Egypt, understanding that it was the repressed trauma that rendered the cities of Tel Aviv and Alexandria, both bordering the Mediterranean, so distant from each other. Driving along the seashore reminds them that geographical distance is only one parameter in displacement trauma. This trauma will persist until their very last day but, as the film’s ending shows, immigration remains an incomprehensible undertaking which requires significant efforts to be integrated into individuals’ lives. Finally, the sisters accept living in a state of double occupancy, that is, living with two different national identities and loyalties, and they come to terms with their displacement. In light of Israeli cinema’s

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<sup>11</sup> Mizrahi Jew is the term usually used when referring to Jews who immigrated to Israel from Middle Eastern and North African countries. However, there are actually significant differences among the countries comprising those regions. They differed not only in their relation to their Jewish subjects, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in relation to the colonial heritage they carried. Whereas North Africa was totally under the domination of French colonialism until the countries’ gradual liberation in the early nineteen sixties, Iraq, Iran and even Egypt were under British rule. One of the main differences between these two kinds of colonialism is to be found in the relative freedom the countries enjoyed: French colonialism aspired to apply the acculturating mission of Western domination and change the nature of the colonized people, while British colonialism was much more tolerant and enabled a freer evolution of the native culture. See footnote 2.

approach to immigration, it seems that Bourriaud's Radicant theory contributes a new perspective, through which the unusual narrative of the triplets from Alexandria can be reevaluated.

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