

Ronit Matalon's Ethnic Masterpiece

Dvir Abramovich, Jan Randa Lecturer in Modern Hebrew Literature, The University of Melbourne, Australia

[1] *The One Facing Us* (1995), Ronit Matalon's first novel is a work of immeasurable originality and force about cultural displacement and the search for roots. An astonishing ballast of narrative pyrotechnics, it synthesises the staple mechanics of the ethnic novel which values the atavistic ancestral elements and the rich tapestry of traditions and folklore as a source of artistic inspiration with the treasury of postmodern modulations. It is an attempt to invigorate the "family roots" novel, which had seemed to assume exhausted, shopworn traits with its stylised pageantry and socio-philosophical form. She succeeds, by deploying a non-linear plot line and a sagacious device to probe the cultural displacement of an Egyptian family, its disintegration and dispersal to Israel, New York and Africa after the Second World War.

[2] According to the author, her primary concern at first was finding the means of expression to be used in depicting the constantly intertwined wondrous people and action of the book:

This thing of writing a novel always seemed to me to be a non-simple challenge. It is not as if one comes into a prepared conformation and empties into it his material. My preoccupation with the framework is also a generational and mental concern, and because the novel is made up of so many ingredients, *the question was how to glue them together, how to fuse them and whether they should be melded together.*" [my italics] (Green 1995, 5)

[3] Indeed, when Beni Tzipper, a fellow writer of Sephardi fiction, speaks of the fundamental change to have occurred in the broad cycle of ethnic literary works, he points out that the shifting patterns and perspectives have been in the format of such works, rather than in the content. Specifically, Tzipper refers to Matalon's *The one Facing Us* as a definite trend showing that a geo-cultural area of Jewish existence (namely, the Levantine reality) which in the past has been presented through a fixed naturalistic prism, can flourish in successive forms by someone who is daring enough to clothe her vast mural of characters and particular social strata in new folds, "It seems to me that recently there has been a separation from the conventional realistic method." (Green, 5)

[4] Events in *The One Facing Us* are seen through the eyes of Esther, a rebellious and independent thinking seventeen year old. The troubled teenager is sent from her home in Tel Aviv by her mother Ines and grandmother Nona Fortuna to visit her maternal uncle Jacques Sicourelle in Cameroon. While there, the astutely observant Esther is 'held hostage' by her wealthy uncle, a factory owner who keeps her passport locked away in his office safe and aunt Marie Ange, who schemes to marry the sassy teenager to Erouan, her son from a previous marriage. Meanwhile, the headstrong Esther, who spends time fishing mango leaves out the vast estate's pool, befriends the household's Cameroonian servants, disregarding her relatives' opposition and criticism. She is incensed and appalled by her uncle's retrograde, colonial existence of tyranny and corruption.

[5] At the same time, she begins to try and piece together the mosaic of her family's story, the aspirations and fortunes that led her uncle to Africa on his own and her mother to Israel. The ossified crust of the past cracks open as she imagines the clan's home in Cairo prior to the war. Here, the lost world of the epic family saga yields to the girl's memory, aided by seventeen old snapshots kept by the various members of the family and the raw material of her elders' tales. The fable like search for the puzzle pieces of her roots leads the narrator to become the genealogist of her kin and to put forward a kaleidoscopic chronicling of a people who always felt like nomads and never quite belonged, even after they have settled in their new 'homeland'. The result is a plethora of brilliant and insightful observations, highly illustrative, either expressing a concrete situation, a thought or a mood, in the process deflating any sentimental delusions that might have been held about her ancestors' identities.

[6] It is noteworthy, that Esther serves as the author's alter ego, who in a case of art imitating life was sent aged nineteen to Cameroon to visit her uncle, anticipating an adventure in Africa as well as hoping for the wealthy uncle to assist her with a trip and study in Italy. While this explains the authority of exact authenticity and intimate tone manifested in the telling, it reminds us that all ethnic novels are the offshoots of the intertwined layers of the elapsed. Inevitably, the author either always returns to their native state for the setting of the novel, a place they may have escaped from or avoided, or draws on some memory or fragments to rescue an important era from the shadows. Esther is the focal point for the five generations of the family represented in the text and she is related to most of the characters directly. The interlocking familial and emotional relationships between the principals convey a great deal of meaning and a picture of the recent historical forces that shaped its distinctive fate.

[7] Towering over the novel's drama is the assembled set of black and white family photographs, which are interspersed throughout the book. Each chapter features a picture, some authentic some fictitious, on the first page. The visual gland is frustrated when certain chapters commence with the caption, 'missing photograph' as a blank frame appears. The story behind the photo (present or absent) is then explained in the body of that particular section by Esther, who staring at those shards of history revivifies the frozen images with a symphony of pastel prose descriptions and a penetrating strobe light vision that reveals in dribblets the total effect of each episode. For example, we have Uncle Sicourelle, Erouan and her father in Gabon 1956; Grandpa Jacquo and Uncle Sicourelle in Cairo 1946; Esther's mother in the yard in Israel.

[8] Esther's tools of deciphering the photomontage also include random letters and anecdotes told to her by grandmother Nunu and other relatives, adding to elusive and fragmentary complexity of her exploration. Adding to the maze of distortion, in which one struggles to get hold of the true essence of the relatives' identity and characterization, is the assemblage of genuine and fake photographs. Each chapter is a step back into the past of the various protagonists, presenting events in both reverse chronological order and the present, drawing us in on the heroes' strained relationships by making us see things through the author's eyes. And, while relying heavily on Esther's first person narration, composed as a diary of little episodes which proffers the reader an insight into the teenager's mind, the point of view is shared with an all knowing narrator. Leaping from character to character, from time to time, from one location to another, Esther delves into the vanishing but unvanquished past seeking to define her forbearers' identity inside the

floating clove of time. The plan is to find her own certifiable version of an arbitrary narrative whose players have adopted numerous positions of faith, locale and selfhood. As if holding a sieve, she picks through the ruins and ruptures of the past that have been bequeathed to her, trying to transform this cracked marquetry into an architectural unified story, pouring forth a narrative with a lasting echo. Consequently, she devotes herself to this task with an intellectual honesty that maintains an objective tone while betraying a current of sympathy and love towards her people.

[9] Another reflection of modern times is the distinct postmodern flavor to this tactic. Matalon overtly co-opts the readers, seducing them to dip into their palette and engage in the construction of the plot. This is hardly surprising, for according to deconstructive dictates, each and every text is both subject to and influenced by the endless permutation of its receptor, be it the reader or critic. Moreover, it is they, who are the chief confectors of its meaning, theme and pattern, regardless of the original author's purpose and intent. The reader, thus, can agree with the edgy observations of the pictures as they filter through Esther's ironic eyes, or may choose to proffer his or her own version. After all, the raw material from which she weaves her novel is also available to her audience at the beginning of every chapter, allowing them to render their own characterisation and evocation of place.

[10] These incoherencies leave the reader blinking and groping in desperate attempts to follow, to understand, but also seduce him or her to engage their own skill and craftsmanship in decoding the personage of the story and plumb their deep reservoirs of feelings about Diaspora and family. In fact, the author has stated that she wanted for there to develop a bi-polar dialogue between her and the readers, for a discussion and an argument to evolve, for them to knot new strands into her creation. To be sure, the concern with the interaction of reader and text is one of the book's fundamental subjects.

[11] Otrusively, the book's title is an invitation for its spectators to examine what lies behind that which faces us, namely the assortment of photographs, which engage our attention. In furtherance of this aim, Matalon, at the outset ropes us into this artifice. On the first page, we see a photograph of her Uncle Sicourelle in the port of Douala with his back to the camera looking straight ahead at the workers, immediately inviting the reader not to decipher what it discloses, but to unravel what it cloaks and conceals, "his is the most important back, the back in white, the back that speaks...my uncle, who stands there like a camera on a tripod, behind which a second camera has captured his unwavering gaze (Matalon, 3) She then alerts us to the arbitrariness and unpredictability of the lens that captured the scenes. There are no absolutes, she says, this version amount to only one of numerous other possibilities,"The camera could just as easily have captured a different arrangement of bodies: the man bending over could just as easily been standing next to the tub; the one with the bare black chest could just as easily have been something else entirely, a shadow gliding over the smooth paving stones, if by chance he had shifted slightly, moved outside the frame." (Matalon, 3-4) Moreover, the dynamic of chance is emphasised, "Chance has erased the faces of these people, melding them into one mass, forging the multiplicity of their diffuse desires into one will, one intent, one response to the dominion of my uncle who stands there with his arms crossed, all eyes and observation." (Matalon, 4)

[12] In many ways, the wielding of authorial instrument demonstrates "the ways in which memories are formed and preserved. It emphasises the limited ability of photos to re-

create the past, and hence the need for an author-observer-interpreter to elucidate what is seen against the background which is absent in the photograph.” (Rattok 1997, 41-3) As the novel begins, Esther says, “When does a photograph come into being? At the moment when real and imaginary meet? A photograph offers evidence of what is remembered but it also intimates what might have been.” (Matalon, 4) And she uses them to, “span the years, to picture myself wobbling across the plaza on a high heeled winter boots. I nod at my past self as if I were someone else. In the end I admit that this could be me, and my lineage could supply a possible identity. Look it’s Monsieur Sicourelle niece, who’s come from Tel Aviv via Paris.” (Matalon, 4) The clear functional thrust of the photograph is to enable her to see inside the core of the splintered mirror of the past, as it is the only concrete, physical source she has at her disposal.

[13] In a specific way, the photographs act as a springboard for the implied author to expand and deepen on what is merely seen, to mention what might have been or will be that is outside the frame, an alternative to recording one’s side using only the means of prose. Certainly, this is circumvention, if only momentary, of the conventional discipline of fiction. Without question, the photographs are the piston engine of *The One Facing Us*, the energy that drives the action and the protagonists, the central expanding fount from which its imaginative power springs as well as the narrator’s ability and need to tell and unravel the ‘authentic’ version of her family’s travails. There is another point. What appears here is the articulate voice of an author-narrator who by placing a visual insignia at the start of each chapter ranges beyond the world of the traditional roots novel, and with a graphic eye is capable of elucidating a patchwork of pieces loosely stitched together, making sense of the circumscribed personage of the images. In full knowledge of her ‘detective’ skills, Matalon holds back as the threads form their design, managing to keep in check an anticipated overflow of description, allowing the plot to unfold in measure. Remarkably, the author’s strategy is not to sew all the fragmented spaces in the blanket of gaps, but allows the discontinuity and interventions of the various characters in the story fill the traces of absent memory.

[14] In an interview with Yitzhak Levatov, Matalon commented on the mindscape that led her to use the photographs and their function within the novel:

I didn’t know during the writing, up until the last third of the book if the photographs would stay, or if they were a defect that had to be removed at the end of the work. At a certain stage of the writing, I felt that in no way are the photographs a blemish or a gimmick, and that I don’t want to take them out. I did not want to obscure or erase the footsteps of the writing. I wanted that for the reader, the tension between what he sees when he looks at them and what I see will remain. By leaving the photographs in, it is as if I have discovered what activated me, what was the ‘trigger’ in my work, and I didn’t want to expunge them...I think the photographs have an important purpose in the construction of the book, which is essentially intellectual, but is also emotional, almost inaccessible for the reader... I intentionally chose vague pictures, not especially nice or of good quality, but ones who are to be found in every family album. (Levataov 1985, 2)

[15] The portrait that surfaces from Esther’s odyssey is not only that of her family, their frailties and flaws but also that of the Levantine culture, which enrobes and affects the

characters' movements and deportment. To aid her discourse, she interpolates into the text a chapter entitled "A Childhood in Egypt" from Jacqueline Kahanof's book *The Sun Rises in the East*. The Cairo born Khanoff recounts her childhood days as one belonging to a minority nation who, "were a people without a language and could speak only through signs and symbols." (Matalon, 179) She speaks of the frustration they experienced learning about the French Revolution, wanting to be like the French children they read about, knowing they never could. They lived in a land in which alienation and anxiety were the norm, where Jews were neither European nor Egyptians, driven into a twilight zone of identity where political sympathies and ideas were suppressed, "This measure of self-deceit and self-deception, which disguised self-doubt, was – and still is characteristic of my Levantine generation." (Matalon, 182) For the most part, Khanaoff reveals her own and her friends' desire to merge with the west, to taste their water and ride its waves, after living under the British in colonial Egypt, yet never managed to do so:

The only language we could think in was the language of Europe and our deeper selves were submerged under this crust of European dialectics, a word we loved to use. We talked and acted as we imagined young people in France talked and acted, little recognising that they were still held within a traditional framework that we had lost... We wanted to break out of the narrow minority framework into which we were born, to strive toward something universal, and we were ashamed of the poverty of what we called the "Arab masses... We hesitated between devoting ourselves to the masses and going to study in Europe, to settle and become Europeans... The Arabs and other colonised people were cultural hybrids by chance, while we, the Levantines, were inescapably so, as if by vocation and destiny. Our ways would therefore probably part, but together we belonged to the Levantine generation. (Matalon, 182-184)

[16] The cast of principals that emerges from Esther's photo album and the unwinding of the peripatetic fates of her clan is that of the Levantine generation. Here, we discover a chain of damaged connections, a story of a band of people who have tasted life's falls and failures and who despite being linked by blood almost never behaved like a family. Yet, throughout the turmoils, they managed to survive, after being forced by the changing conditions of poverty and hostile politics to flee Cairo. We meet her father Robert, a pan Arabist who gets involved in the Israeli left and later decides to explore Africa, taking off with a group of adventurers without telling anyone. Esther's uncle Moise, an ardent Zionist, leaves Egypt for Palestine in the late 1940's to establish a kibbutz in the North. Moise is followed by Esther's mother Inés and grandmother Nona Fortuna. Ines, who had seven abortions and who, Esther reveals, considered getting rid of her is Nona Fortuna who is described as lacking all emotions of spontaneity, warmth and joy, refusing to snap off her ties to the old country. There is also Esther's paternal grandmother, Nona Margueritta, whom she limns as a bashful, passionless and spoilt aristocrat, a woman resisting change at every turn while being fettered by the chains of convention, "frozen in a strange, worldly death of stultifying inner contradictions." (Matalon, 185)

[17] We are also introduced to Moises' bother Edouard, a man whose weak demeanour deceives all as he rises in the ranks to become the feared and tyrannical commander of

Israel's intelligence service interrogation unit in Gaza. He is a man whose "restless pursuit of different identities, and promiscuous sailing among people and things" (Matalon, 138) has uncovered a centre of radicalism. Notably, it is only when he infrequently visits with the family that he shows an uncharacteristic reflexive awareness of the past, with "elaborate oriental gestures of respect and honour" (Matalon, 138). Again and again, Matalon hints at the paradoxical nature of her protagonists' lives in Israel, physically present, yet mentally and culturally set apart from the mainstream of society. This repeatedly points up the theme of the people who never feel at home. In essence, the battlefield is within the self, the struggle is to find a balance between the head and the heart, to reconcile 'then' and 'there' with the 'here' and 'now'.

[18] Away from the family, Edouard, we learn, had undergone a major change - he speaks Arabic almost all the time, in a manner both aggressive and strange. At every opportunity, he lambasts Uncle Moise and Inés for succumbing to the Ashkenazi hegemony and assimilating their Arab identity, declaring clearly his alienation and conflict with the greater part of society from which he strives to wander away. And Robert's sister, Nadine, a librarian and Emily Dickenson aficionado with suicidal tendencies living in New York. Rounding off the eclectic mix of eccentric characters is the Frenchman Henri Lehman, married to Esther's aunt, Marcelle. A particularly striking incident, which emphasises the notion of the arbitrariness of identity, involves Henri. Walking purposelessly at night after a nasty quarrel with Marcelle, he accidentally crosses the Jordanian border into Kalkilya, where he is captured and incarcerated. There, for three months he is tortured by the Jordanians who assume he is an Israeli spy, though the despaired fellow is in truth a rejected French lover. Identities are illusory, shaped and moulded by other's perceptions and expectations. Certainly, after fighting in the 1948 War of Independence, something happens to Henri, who begins ploughing the telephone books in every city he visits, searching for lost relatives. Henri is motivated by the prospect of finding lost Lehmans, imagining the various members of the family, dispersed around the globe as extensions of his own personality.

[19] The golden thread that runs through Esther's narrative is her relatives' view of Israel not as the yearned for Promised Land, but rather as place to escape to. Egypt is home, Israel the Diaspora. The strictures and actions of the plot reveal the summation of this historical fact. As readers of the text sift through the remains of the fabric of the past, a clear picture of this mode of thinking is arrayed. During an interview with Ines conducted in a Tel Aviv hotel by Zuza, a cousin of Esther who is also an American journalist writing a book about her roots, Esther's mother says of their life in Egypt, "it was very happy. We were very happy in Egypt. Much happier than here." (Matalon, 273). Robert shuns his Jewish heritage while in Israel and later on a Kibbutz, preferring to adopt the philosophical tenets of Arab nationalism. He comes to Israel only because his wife does so, and within a week in the kibbutz, where he is expected to work the fields, he goes back to the suits and silk handkerchiefs of Egypt and quickly leaves the kibbutz for the city. Later, in the transit camp, he again vanishes, oscillating from job to job, trying to mend the injured pride of a man "...whose true nature had been quashed, who had been denied the life he was born to, the life of a Levantine gentleman." (Matalon, 172) Henri and Marcelle take their loathing of the country a step further, when in August 1954 they leave Israel - as recorded in a photograph featuring some of the family in the Port of Haifa, which dapples a chapter midway through the book. As a matter of fact, it is Henri

who seems to personify the desperately unhappy émigré. Feeling alienated and troubled in Israel, he quickly packs up his things and takes Marcelle and their baby to Paris, swearing never to return.

[20] Yet, more than any other major character, it is Nona Fortuna who exemplifies the disrelish invoked by Matalon's people, an increasingly alone and bitter woman on whom the author puts the weight of her dominant theme to float a larger meaning about the Levantine dislocation. She is representative of the innermost self that continually screams for what was, unable to embrace the new country and be born anew with the lessons of the past appreciated. Alongside the others, she is unwilling or perhaps unable to break of the fettering manacles of the past, a notion of a peculiarly Zionist quality and turn the past into a liberation rather than a burden. This posture is at the heart of what happens to Nona Fortuna, once she arrives in Israel. For her, coming to Israel is a nightmare from which she cannot awake. One is forcibly struck by the sweeping attitude of Nona Fortuna towards the country and its inhabitants, dense with disgust and repudiation "She hated everything in sight. Jews and Arabs, Ashkenazis and Sephardi, the religious and the secular, the wealthy and the poor - she saw them all as riffraff, the uneducated masses, rude and charmless, cruel and ridiculous in their endless war over a piece of land she didn't consider "worth spit." (Matalon, 255)

[21] Moreover, the Zionist philosophy that preached that anything not achieved through struggle and hard physical work was not worthwhile, was completely incongruous to her thinking, an "anathema" (Matalon, 255). Her desire for an ideal, graceful world, devoid of sweat and rough skin was constantly thwarted by the cacophony of modern Israeli life. Despite the repeated pleading by her son Moise, who viewed her stubbornness as absurd, to change with the times, to cease with her outbursts of antipathy, the old woman turned off the clock of the present, preferring to remain behind the mask of her former home. Uncle Moise's attempts proved fruitless because his mother's prism was one sided, a "set of tastes, an utterly foreign lexicon from an utterly foreign place." (Matalon, 226). Sadly, her self-indulgence- turning her back on Israel- was based on an illusory belief. Doubtless, her self-isolation prevented her from recognising the central truth that she had "left behind a world that had been obliterated, that was no more, that was now but wishful thinking, a dream, a memory." (Matalon, 226) The critic Yosef Oren says that the novel's arc is the uprooting of the Levantine generation, who cut off from its roots in the east lost its authentic, self-contained identity and thus the value of family unity. (Oren 1997, 99)

[22] In more than one sense, the novel is a meditation on the role memory plays in the pursuit of the past and the individual's search for identity among the contrarities of life. The collection of vignettes have been distilled through the sieve of time and through the less than objective agendas of those in the present, subjectively recalling their own versions which are filtered through Esther. She in turn, gleans much from the not always truthful reminisces and strikingly powerful silences which blur the boundaries between the past and the present. As the novel draws to a close, Uncle Sicourelle hands Esther her passport, which he had kept from her, together with a plane ticket and a roll of bills. He tells her, "I want you to do whatever you want. Go conquer the world, ya Esther. You show them." (Matalon, 284) Uncle Sicourelle wants his niece to break the shackles of madness, failure and stasis, which had bound her relatives. Esther's calling is to look the

world in the eye, to focus her intense gaze and sound her voice while finding an exit out of the maze of the past.

[23] From an early age, we are told, Esther was the eyes of her blind grandmother, a task that would later bloom into her role as the family's narrator-chronicler. For five *agorot* per photograph, Esther would sit with her grandmother and describe them to her, sometimes earning as much as thirty-five agorot on days when the blind woman did not argue about what was in them. "I helped her, I was her eyes. You are my eyes," Nona would say." (Matalon, 64) The two share a language beyond speech, a symbiosis that brings the young girl to recognise her orientation as a writer and infuses her with the knowledge about the proper way to tell a story-without sentimentality and with crushing honesty.

[24] As a counterpoint to Matalon's deft kaleidoscope, we meet Esther's cousin Zuza, an American journalist for the *Washington Times* who arrives in Israel to write a book about her family and roots. Zuza typifies the bland, superficial reporter, who obeys the fads of the day, eager to begin a romance with a subject promising commercial returns, "Roots are a very hot topic in America at the moment," she says, "A lot of people are writing books about them, articles screenplays." (Matalon, 271) And the reason for this vogue: "...there's a story with immense dramatic potential. Colourful characters, the disintegration of the family, the disintegration of the colonial world, the dispersal-it's all very exciting." (Matalon, 271) Unlike Esther, Zuza merely captures the exterior, reducing the art of searching for one's home to a parodic level, "In order to really see a photograph" she announces to Esther and her mother "you have to avert your eyes or simply shut them." (Matalon, 268) Matalon tips her self-reflexive hat, when she has Zuza explain the premise of her work as the search for her own self, "a clue to where she's come from, who she really is. 'What I am, Who I am, What I am-that's what it's all about.'" (Matalon, 271) Zuza believes, as those who pursue their family's background do, that her descendants will provide her with an authentic identity in the present, tell her who she really is. The abrasive American's currency is an ill-defined, shallow vision of oriental life, underscored by her simplistic quizzing of Inés that works to reinforce the disparity between Esther's full dress treatment and Zuza's Hollywoodized version. In the Tel-Aviv Hilton, armed with a tape recorder, she fires a series of question at Inés, reading from her notebook, denuded of any subtlety: "Who were they? What did they do? Do you know? (Matalon, 272); "Forget about going back generation, Tante, 'Zuza says', agitated. 'Look at me'. She leans towards mother. 'Look at me. Do I have the face of someone with lineage? I ask you.'" (Matalon, 272); Describe the family to me, Tante. The traditions, the holidays, your education, everything." (Matalon, 273) Inés's trite answers further compound Zuza's debasement of the fascinating interlocking structures of the social milieu and human cycle of the orient, "There wasn't any-I don't know tradition. We were always eating from morning to night-we never shut our mouths! To this day I don't know where we put it all" (Matalon, 273); People live, they love, they leave, they die-what's so special about it?" (Matalon, 274); Finally, Inés admonishes the over zealous American when Zuza expresses surprise over Ines's refusal to idealise Egypt, "Roots, roots, roots. A person doesn't need roots, Zuza, a person needs a home." (Matalon, 278)

[25] Through Zuza, Miri Paz argues, the author underlines her own triumph in revealing the elements of her personal history - Matalon is able to transcend the journalistic

penchant for superficiality represented by her American counterpart. (Paz 1995, 6) The wincingly profound, sensuous and contradictory history of the Levantine community gains much of its distinctive power from Esther's ability to overcome caricature and render her people as real and conflicted. On another level, the Zuza episode can be viewed as an attack by the implicit author on the so called folkloristic genre whose metier is to cast those from the east as exotic, with a romantic mystique. In *The One Facing Us*, Matalon moves away from the bare bones, compressed, hollow portrait of the politically correct newspaperwoman to the deeply veined, intricate and resonant exploration offered by literature.

[26] At the bottom of Zuza's vignette and others, lies a fundamental theme with which the book is constantly preoccupied- the one of 'seeing'. The permanent component of 'looking' is the most all-embracing motif in Matalon's fiction, a ring that gradually stretches out and envelops the spectrum of her story. From the very first chapter, the reader is interpellated to view the photographs as objective evidence of Esther's family, adding to the atmosphere of authenticity forcefully advanced throughout. What Esther values most is the primordial element of human nature, which, if we choose to, enables us to see things as they are, to break free from the qualities of sentimentality, pathos, and kitschy folklorism, which Zuza and her contemporaries peddle.

[27] Zuza favours a bombastic and politically correct style, travelling a road of artistic endeavour that promotes the false belief that one can delineate the circuitous and multi-layered oriental universe in one swift stroke. In this respect, the novel is about the basic opposition of seeing and blindness - human beings can either elect to experience the world, as it is, fragmented, grey and elusive, or be 'blind' by accepting a crudely simplified account. Embracing/seeing life in all its manifestations and images is a choice. This point is illustrated in the unusual story the visiting Dr. Cohen tells Esther. The Israeli ophthalmologist who spent two years in Malawi with a group of doctors, performed cataract surgery on blind Malawi children living in a mission. After the operations, however, the children who regained their sight did not want to see, pricking their eyes with sticks, nails and glass so as to go blind again.

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