

## [Halperin on Harris, 'An Ideological Death: Suicide in Israeli Literature'](#)

Review published on Saturday, July 18, 2015

**Rachel S. Harris.** *An Ideological Death: Suicide in Israeli Literature*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014. xi + 268 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8101-2978-8.

**Reviewed by** Liora Halperin (University of Colorado Boulder) **Published on** H-Judaic (July, 2015)  
**Commissioned by** Matthew A. Kraus

### **Zionist Ideology and Its Limits: Accounting for the Suicide Trope in Late Twentieth-Century Israeli Literature**

Why do so many characters in Israeli Hebrew literature, particularly since the 1970s, commit suicide? Rachel Harris, in her recent book *An Ideological Death: Suicide in Israeli Literature*, makes the case that suicide is not primarily to be understood as an expression of individual grief, romantic loss, or mental illness—as is the case in much of Western literature—but rather has a particular social function within a period of widespread political critique in Israel. It is a means, she argues, of questioning a series of ideologically infused Zionist cultural norms by creating characters who are unable to live with, or within, those norms.

Harris's primary vantage point onto Zionist culture is Israeli Hebrew works of fiction that emerged during a period, beginning in the 1970s, in which Zionist ideological norms were increasingly being questioned in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur/October War and the controversial Israeli invasion of Lebanon that followed nearly a decade later. Sitting at the intersection of literary studies and cultural history, Harris draws from historians Yael Zerubavel and Nurit Gertz, among others, in arguing that “any analysis of a text must combine a study of the product, in this case a literary text, with knowledge about the cultural codes of the society that produced it” (p. 17). The meanings of suicide in the literary texts that are Harris's focus are thus visible only when one takes into consideration shifting political and cultural norms that were emerging beyond the literary realm.

Several such cultural codes form the structure of *An Ideological Death*, which surveys and illuminates norms of masculinity and military bravery, the collective Zionist narrative of Jewish history, the “First Hebrew City” myths surrounding Tel Aviv, and the role of women, by indicating how each of these is challenged and undermined—and, in a few cases, counterintuitively upheld—in works of literature that emerged in this period. The final chapter offers a comparative survey of suicide in various world literatures.

Harris's central argument about the political function of the suicide plot is particularly compelling in chapter 1, on masculinity, which considers images of Samson in Israeli literature and chapter 2, on militarism, which focuses on a text by Yehoshua Kenaz about the suicide of a soldier. These chapters situate literary trends not only in the context of modern Zionism but within a longer Jewish textual tradition that includes biblical and rabbinic texts as well as Yiddish literature and modern European literature that treat the topic of suicide. Samson, who epitomizes both masculine strength and its

undoing, commits suicide in the Philistine temple, as he brings down the pillars of the temple upon himself and the assembled worshippers. The analysis of military and masculine images makes particular sense given that the upheaval of Israel in the 1970s and 1980s centered particularly on Israel's military activity and related narratives of Israel's—and Israelis'—invincibility and military strength.

Harris moves from this point to a broader set of cultural tropes. The third chapter, which is particularly well structured, considers three texts (by Benjamin Tammuz, A. B. Yehoshua, and Alon Hili) that upset ideological presumptions about communal identity and shared history through family narratives marked by instability and individuality. This chapter speaks to a change in Israeli society that pertained less to Israeli military strength and more to broader doubts about Israeli collectivity and shared narrative. These aspects of Israeli ideology had been challenged by the influx of Mizrahi Jewish immigrants and the beginnings of their more organized political consciousness, the rise of the New Historians who challenged specific canonical elements of the story of Israel's birth, and the emergence of post-Zionism rooted in conceptions of liberal individualism.

Chapter 4, about Tel Aviv, adds to a growing body of scholarly work on the metropolis that returns this city to the center of the study of Zionism, for example, works by Barbara Mann, Maoz Azaryahu, and Anat Helman. The suicide trope in literature about Tel Aviv serves to depict Tel Aviv as degenerate, monstrous, decaying, and dangerous. While Harris notes that such depictions are common in modern literary treatments of cities elsewhere, she suggests that the ideological critique is particularly salient here, given Tel Aviv's position at the heart of Zionist ideology, having arisen expressly as a statement of that ideology. In this case, the particular historical context of these depictions is less clearly situated in the chosen chronological framework of the late twentieth century, drawing as it does on tensions around Tel Aviv's identity as both typical and aberrant that had existed at least since the 1920s, tensions about whether Tel Aviv was an international city or a specifically Jewish city, and whether it was an expression of the essence of the Zionist project or an aberration from it.

There is a certain tension in Harris's work; her authors, through the trope of suicide, challenge essential features of Zionist ideological norms or show them to exist in a state of breakdown. At the same time, however, she stresses that the authors she considers are "not post-Zionist" and hold mostly moderate political views. Indeed, they challenge aspects of Zionist ideology only by upholding others. For example, in her treatment of Yehoshua Kenaz's work *Infiltration (Hitganvut yehidim, 1986)*, she writes, "Despite his powerful critique of the system, Kenaz does not reject or abandon the Zionist vision. The majority of the characters survive with positive futures within the Israeli collective. They do not reject the nation or the army" (p. 94).

The observation that Hebrew literature of the 1970s did as much to uphold ideological norms as to question them is particularly salient in Harris's penultimate chapter, about female suicides. This chapter, like chapter 1, expertly surveys historical Jewish attitudes toward women and women's suicide before proceeding to an analysis of more recent texts. The trope of suicide in these texts about women, she shows, is—unlike most of the other texts in the book—used not to call into question norms of Zionist ideology but rather to reemphasize one particular fixture of Zionist ideology since its inception: that women's primary function is to bear children and that women who do not or cannot bear children or properly raise them are social outcasts who have no real purpose in life. "Tami's

critique of Israel,” Harris writes of the protagonist’s sister in Yehudit Katzir’s work *Closing the Sea* (1992), “is only possible because it functions within the accepted norms for women in Israel. It is possible to criticize many aspects of the national narrative, but myths of motherhood remain sacred and incontestable” (p. 206). This chapter serves to highlight the selective nature of the ideological critique that obtains throughout the body of texts considered in this book. Suicide is deployed to cast doubt on central aspects of Israeli society, but it highlights a specific sort of critique: one earned by those who not only know how to manipulate and deploy a vocabulary of available Zionist tropes to critical ends, but who also know how to selectively uphold other ideological features. The suicide trope seems to work best in texts that challenge and provoke thought in an Israeli readership, but which cannot be rejected as beyond the ideological pale.

The ideological death, ultimately, does not signify the death of ideology. Rather, as Harris shows, it marks only the selective critique of this ideology by an Israeli society coming of age in the late twentieth century, a critique that is successful only because of the continuing salience of the very ideological assumptions that are being challenged.

**Printable Version:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=43396>

**Citation:** Liora Halperin. Review of Harris, Rachel S., *An Ideological Death: Suicide in Israeli Literature*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2015. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43396>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).