

Three Mothers (2006) by Dina Zvi-Riklis

Subjects: Others

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Dina Zvi-Riklis' film *Three Mothers* (2006) reveals a complex approach to the issue of 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. But more than anything, the two approaches share a common imperative to forget the past. However, this imperative does not apply to the heroines of *Three Mothers*, a film which follows the extraordinary trajectory of triplet sisters, born to a rich Jewish family in Alexandria, who were forced to leave Egypt after King Farouk's abdication and immigrate to Israel. This article demonstrates that *Three Mothers* represents an outstanding achievement because it dares to deal with its heroines' longing for the world left behind and the complexity of integrating the past into the present. Following Nicholas Bourriaud's Radicant theory, designating an organism that grows roots and adds new ones as it advances, this article will prove that though the heroines 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: Immigration ; Radicant ; Judaism ; Mothers and Daughters ; Memory ; Post Memory ; Displacement ; Israeli Cinema ; Melodrama ; Mizrahi Jews ; Double Occupancy

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*,⁵ 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 [2002] 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 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 \[2002\] 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,⁶ 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 \[1996\] 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 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 Imot*, 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 Zvi-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.