

CHAPTER 15

Masking one's themes

Irony and the politics of indirectness*

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An appropriate theory of irony should be able to account for irony interpretation. Upon the graded salience hypothesis (Giora, 1997b; in press) and indirect negation view of irony (Giora, 1995), processing irony should involve processing the literal meaning initially (see also Dews and Winner, 1997; Giora, Fein and Schwartz, 1998; Giora and Fein, 1999a; Schwoebel *et al.*, 2000; for a different view see Gibbs, 1986a, b 1994). Upon the indirect negation view, this literal meaning should not be suppressed and replaced (as assumed by Grice, 1975). Rather, it should be retained (as shown by Giora *et al.*, 1998; Giora and Fein, 1999a, b) so that the dissimilarity between the literal and the intended interpretations may be computed (for a similar view see Bredin, 1997). Such view of irony enables us to better decipher the meaning of irony, and account for its various functions.

Introduction

Consider the following poster, entitled 'Guerrilla Girls explain the concept of natural law' (cited in Crawford, 1995: 162):

Protecting the rights of the unborn means precisely that. Once you're born, you're on your own.

Women who report it are uptight prudes. Women who don't are ambitious whores.

Women are paid less in the work-place because they have no business being there. Anyone who is unemployed or homeless deserves it.

The people who have the most money are entitled to the best health care.

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AIDS is a punishment for homosexuality and drug abuse. Only heterosexuals, celebrities and children deserve a cure.

Life is beautiful. Artists, writers or performers who want to inflict disgusting, homosexual, erotic, satirical or political images upon the public should have their xxxxxx grants cut off.

Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous group of women who protest women's marginalization — the practices which keep women (and other underrepresented groups) away from the arena of policy and decision making — in society and in the Arts. They use the names of women artists of the past, and appear in gorilla masks. For over seven years they have created over 40 posters which, by means of irony mainly, address taboo topics, challenge the dominant groups' (e.g., men's) values — values which benefit men and which are taken from men's point of view⁹⁹ — and protest women's discrimination (cf. Crawford, 1995). Why do they wear masks? Why do they use irony?

The answer to both these questions, I suggest, lies in women's social powerlessness. As a powerless group — a group which is underrepresented in the public arena of policy and decision, playing mostly an inferior (e.g., employee; subordinate) rather than a superior (employer; government) role — women resort to protective devices such as indirectness, particularly when communicating subversive ideas. Indeed, to protect themselves, dissident women have often used forms of indirectness such as pseudonyms, men's attire, or subversive writing — writing which pretends to be hegemonic for purposes of camouflage (see Lubin, 1993, 1994, 1995b, and references therein). Such texts “communicate the hegemonic message, but at the same time question the exclusiveness of the normative authority of this hegemony”. The mask of hegemony facilitates their reception by the hegemony, thereby promoting the ideas resisting this very hegemony (Lubin, 1995a:352, and see also Muecke, 1970 about the potential of irony to convey subversive ideas). Indeed, forms of indirection such as irony and fantasy have been shown to question and challenge cultural assumptions in contemporary novels by women (e.g. Walker, 1991).

Irony has been traditionally acknowledged as a form of indirectness; as saying the opposite of what is meant (e.g., Grice, 1975). More recently, it has been treated as a form of indirect negation (Giora, 1995): It negates without using overt negation. More often than not, an affirmative expression or utterance is used to implicate that a specific state of affairs is different or far from the taken for granted state of affairs made explicit by the very same expression. This view thus

99. On the ability of women and men to set out from their own point of view and its effect on their linguistic practices see Ariel and Giora, 1998).

holds that the ironic interpretation is not accessed directly, not even in a rich context (as claimed by e.g., Gibbs, 1986a). Rather, understanding irony involves activating the surface literal meaning either in parallel or prior to processing the intended ironic meaning as shown by Giora and Fein (1999a), Giora, Fein and Schwartz (1998). However, unlike Grice (1975), who holds that the literal meaning is processed but is rejected and replaced, viewing irony as indirect negation implies that the literal meaning is instrumental in constructing the ironic interpretation. It is activated and retained so that the difference between what is said and what is referred to may be computed. Thus, by saying "Life is beautiful", Guerrilla Girls point out the extent to which life has fallen short of expectations, and is far from being beautiful. Similarly, by exposing an implicitly accepted norm (see Wilson and Sperber, 1992) such as "Sexual harassment is man's natural response to women on the job", Guerrilla Girls do not communicate the opposite (as contended by the classical view, e.g., Grice, 1975) i.e., that 'Sexual harassment is man's *unnatural* response to women on the job'. Instead, they point out the extent to which the norm exposed is far from being right and desirable.¹⁰⁰

What may be achieved by opting for irony — by masking one's theme — rather than by criticizing directly? What may be achieved by protesting indirectly? First, since indirect messages are more difficult to understand than direct ones, they take longer to resist (e.g., Yi, 1990).¹⁰¹ This may be particularly true of irony. As shown by Giora (1995) and Giora and Fein (1999a), Giora, Fein and Schwartz (1998), processing utterances in an ironically biasing context takes longer than processing the same utterances in a literally biasing context. Since ironic messages require longer exposure, they must, under similar time constraints, be more difficult to reject than straightforward statements.

Irony's indirectness resists counter-argument for another reason. Given the (usually) affirmative articulation of the ironic statement, the subversiveness of the ironical criticism is implicit and less straightforward than when the negation or condemnation is overt. Therefore, it may escape the eye of the beholder (e.g., the ironized victim). At worst, however, the speaker can even deny (on false pretense, of course) having expressed a negative attitude (because s/he has not been explicit about it), and consequently avoid retribution (see Haiman, 1990: 203 for a similar view and Hutcheon, 1994, for a different view).

100. On the limits of the indirect negation view, see Giora (in press).

101. This statement is true only as far as nonconventional utterances are concerned. Indirect conventional utterances (e.g., indirect requests) do not require extra mental effort (e.g., Gibbs, 1986b). They are salient (Giora, 1997b, Giora and Fein, 1999a), i.e., retrieved directly from the mental lexicon.

Moreover, the ironic message cannot be as easily rejected as can a straightforward negation of either a negative or affirmative statement, because the ironic message is not asserted. Consider, for example, the directly negated assertions (2a), (4a) below. They can be disputed by e.g., disagreeing or deleting the negation marker (2b, 4b, below). The ironies (italicized) in (3a, 5a) below, however, cannot. They can neither be contradicted by adding a negation marker (3b, 5b, below), since the utterance is not a straightforward affirmative sentence. Nor can they be denied by deleting the negation marker (3c, 5c, below), since the negation is implicit:

- (2) a. Life is not beautiful.
 b. You are wrong. {Life is beautiful}.
- (3) a. *Life is beautiful.*
 b. ?You are wrong. Life is not beautiful.
 c. ?You are wrong. Life is beautiful.
- (4) a. Sexual harassment is not man's natural response to women on the job.
 b. You are wrong. It is.
- (5) a. *Sexual harassment is man's natural response to women on the job.*
 b. ?You are wrong. It is not.
 c. ?You are wrong. It is.

At times the ironic implicature cannot be canceled by a straightforward negation. Consider for instance the following example in which X is assumed by A to be a priest, while B discovers that X is a serial killer. B then says to A (either 6a or 6b):

- (6) a. What X is doing is really holy.
 b. What X is doing is not at all holy.

Both (6a) and (6b) are just as ironic. The interesting point is that the irony of (6b) is not canceled by the negation marker, because the improbability of assigning the attribute *holy* to X, which accounts for the ironic effect (Giora, 1995), is not affected by the overt negation. Irony, then, is difficult to counter-argue.

Second, given that processing irony involves activating and retaining the literal meaning as well (Giora, 1995; Giora and Fein, 1999a,b; Giora *et al.*, 1998), irony must be less risky than direct disapproval. Activating the literal interpretation mitigates the aggressiveness of the criticism. Indeed, Kaplan, Levy, Rosenblatt, Gardner and Winner (1987) reported in Winner (1988), and Dews and Winner (1995) reveal that direct negative statements or insults are perceived, by both adults and children, as more aggressive than their ironic counterparts. No wonder various researchers (e.g., Barbe, 1995; Dews and Winner, 1995; Leech, 1983; Chen,

1990; Myers, 1990) consider irony "a politeness strategy": Irony enables the speaker to oppose, deny, contradict, disagree, suggest the contrary, the opposite, a less than interpretation etc., by using an affirmative (or an acceptable) expression. It should therefore come as no surprise that powerless groups resort to this form of indirect criticism (e.g., Guerrilla Girls, Fay Weldon's *Female Friends*, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* as discussed by Walker, 1991 and see references therein).

Irony, then, is an effective tool by means of which powerless groups may be critical of the dominant group. Since irony interpretation involves an initial literal phase, irony may be misunderstood by the uninitiated audience (see Clark, 1996; Clark and Gerrig, 1984). Speakers wishing to transmit radical ideas may find the illusory meaning of irony rather appealing. Due to its surface (usually) affirmative (and at times normative/consensual) meaning, irony can mask the negatively intended nonconformist message, thereby enabling the speaker to shun punishment. At the same time, however, irony helps smuggle rebellious and dissident ideas in a manner that does not allow them to be easily countered. Irony, then, is particularly effective when sacred or taboo topics are being questioned.

Along these lines, the novel *Dolly City* by the Israeli female author Orly Castel-Bloom is examined here. It is suggested that the novel's use of indirectness, particularly its use of irony, stems from a need to disguise its intended, subversive themes, while simultaneously getting them across. Given contemporary Hebrew literature, *Dolly City* unprecedentedly challenges taboo concepts such as patriarchal motherhood, and patriarchy in general. The theory of irony as indirect negation offers a method to disclose masked themes, so that the uninitiated audience will be misled, while the target audience will be enlightened.

Maternal love — a sacred cow

One of the topics least challenged by Israeli female authors (and the public in general) concerns the myth of motherhood. Since the inception of the second wave of the feminist movement in 1970s, Israeli women have managed to question almost any concept related to theirs and men's life. Though they are still far from enjoying equal rights and opportunities, it is no longer questionable that they are entitled to live in a nonoppressive, egalitarian environment. However, unlike feminists in the West who have deconstructed and reconstructed almost all male biased concepts, slowly gaining intellectual and spiritual autonomy, Israeli women have not dared directly question motherhood and maternal love.

Feminists in the West have examined the notion of motherhood ever since de Beauvoir's (1949) pioneering attempt in *The second sex* to take issue with the concept and its practice. De Beauvoir put it overtly and bluntly: "For some

women childbirth is a martyrdom . . . There are . . . many mothers who are alarmed at their new responsibilities . . . [N]o maternal 'instinct' exists . . . [The] cruel aspect of maternity has always been known, but it has in the past been hypocritically attributed to the figure of the cruel step-mother, punishing the offspring of a 'good' mother who is dead" (pp. 522–542). Her views later found support by Firestone (1972). "In her book *The dialectic of sex*," comments de Beauvoir, Firestone "links women's liberation with children's liberation. That is correct, because women will not be liberated until they have been liberated from their children, and by the same token, until children have also been liberated from their parents" (Schwarzer, 1984:39).

No less shocking and thought provoking is Badinter (1981). Her book *L'amour en plus* is a disturbing historical document, lending support for de Beauvoir's claim (following Helene Deutsch) that maternal love is a sentiment, not an instinct. In her book, Badinter adduces evidence which attests to the existence of the 'bad', unloving mother. She reports of the indifference of the mothers, particularly the wealthy mothers of the 17th and 18th century to their children, whom they unnecessarily abandoned to suffer fatal calamities.

In her book, *Against our will: Men women and rape*, Susan Brownmiller (1975) goes as far as suggesting that motherhood may have been the price women had to pay the men who became their protectors against male violence. Motherhood, she believes, has been a penal servitude.

In *Of woman born*, Adriene Rich (1976:1) discloses a diary extract she wrote fifteen years earlier in which she reports of her ambivalent feelings as a mother: "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alteration between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometime I seem to myself, in my feelings towards these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. And I am weak sometimes from held-in rage. There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another, when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom."

These are just a few examples. But have these subversive ideas had any effect on women's self-image and self-definition during the generations that followed? When asked, Israeli women of the 1990s see motherhood as the primary component of their identity, even though most of these women have a profession and expertise (Friedman, 1996). Despite some changes in sex-roles regarding the professions, "women continue to be primary parents, both within the family and

in alternate child-care settings" (Chodorow, 1978:216). This is not less true of women on the verge of the 21st century.

How do Israeli women, writing in Hebrew, cope with motherhood — a patriarchal institution of such grandeur in Jewish tradition?¹⁰² To judge from contemporary (Hebrew) literary writings, women's frustration with motherhood is not given vent to directly. Mother-protagonists mostly turn their anger against themselves, victimizing themselves (e.g., Almog's, 1986 "Martha tamati ad netsah") as do other female characters while in conflict with male oppression (Giora, 1997a).

According to Rattok (1994) who surveys Israeli women writings, female writers began to question maternal love directly only during the 1990s. Though 'bad', miserably guilty mothers prevailed in women's literature even earlier, these were mostly daughters' rather than mothers' tales. Roni Giv'ati (1990), maintains Rattok, is a pioneering attempt to allow an insight into a mother's mind. Giv'ati's heroine entertains the vision of a mother abandoning her children, "running away from where she is, free from her children, laughing, refreshed" (p. 71).¹⁰³ Nevertheless, she never reaches the point of actually acting upon her dreams.

Two other stories (Bernstein, 1992; Ofer, 1989) tell of the difficulties of mothers to love their daughters in a patriarchal society, in which a young daughter is her mother's rival over the love of the man. A more recent and daring attempt to question maternal love is exercised in Tsruya Shalev's (1993) *Dancing standing still*. Motherhood is just one topic this novel so flagrantly protests. And though the protest sounds direct, it cannot be taken seriously, since the speaker is not an ordinary woman, but a woman driven mad by love, men, parents, motherhood. Her insanity, however, allows her to speak her mind. She can be candid about topics women are silenced about, because she is free of the shackles of societal norms. She can thus speak openly of the fear women have of their own child:

102. The fights against the Palestinians waged by Nethanyahu's newly established government were protested by e.g., 'Religious women and mothers' under the slogan 'Every man has a mother' (emphases added), released by *Bat Shalom the Jerusalem Link* which is a feminist organization (10.1996); The protest against the Israeli involvement in Lebanon is headed by a women's movement entitled 'The four mothers' (emphasis added). Even at the very end of the 20th century, women in Israel do not speak up as women when they are critical. Rather, they resort to indirectness which masks their real themes/criticism, most notoriously the guise of motherhood, which legitimizes having an opinion (regarding the sons' life). One interesting exception, though, is *Women in black*, a radical leftist peace movement, which neither avoids its gender identity, nor the straightforwardness of its protest against the Israeli occupation of the territories (see also Giora, 1997c).

103. All the translations in this article are mine (R.G.).

This child, from the moment I saw her twisting in the gigantic hands of the gynaecologist, she scared me to death. I would have rather been left alone with a veiled rapist who is a drug addict than with her. Her whimper at nights made me sweat of fear . . . her cries in the mornings got me stuck under my blanket. (p.56)

The insane female protagonist rejects her child. She invents a game which she plays with her lover entitled "who can be away from her/his child for the longest period", in which she excels (p. 64). On another occasion she entertains the thought of abandoning her child: "Maybe I could pass her over to another woman for a number of years, until it is no longer dangerous, and then I will come back, a wrinkled old woman, all the afflictions behind me, and reclaim her" (p. 67).

The impossibility of maternal love is dealt with ironically. On one occasion the protagonist describes the baby she would be willing to accept:

One that "would be on her own from the moment she is born. [One that] would change her own diapers, and wash herself. Would pacify herself at night, and who knows, maybe even pacify me.

"When you come here to look after her' I am saying to my mother, 'You won't have to be scared by her, because you will know that she will always tell you what she needs'" (p. 184).

Motherhood can be terrorizing. However, coming from the mouth of an outcast, such a message has no real threat. Shalev has used devices of indirectness to be able to protest out loud one of the most sacred patriarchal institutions.

Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City* (1992) is another attempt at protesting the absurdities of maternal love. It is the most daring attempt exercised so far in the Israeli literature written in Hebrew. But even Castel-Bloom resorts to devices of indirectness: the plot is fantastic, it takes place in a futuristic city, the female protagonist is most bizarre if not crazy,¹⁰⁴ and the style — ironic. Yet, unlike the previously mentioned attempts, Castel-Bloom has taken one step further towards a more annoying criticism: Her protagonist acts out her subversive ideas.

104. *Dolly City* is a dystopian novel. However, this aspect of indirectness is not addressed here, though, of course, it is highly relevant to and supportive of the thesis proposed here. Like irony, fantasy in the contemporary novel by women questions received traditions and poses alternatives (Walker, 1991). According to Walker, (1991: 44), "[w]riters who challenge the dominant discourse typically do so by employing some form of irony, whereas those who stress women's position outside the discourse are more apt to use fantasy as a concomitant narrative strategy".

Dolly city — an ironic configuration of maternal love

If taken (only) literally, the fictional protagonist of *Dolly City* is a ferocious mother who would do practically anything to protect her son (e.g., “I could doubtlessly shoot my mother for daring to expose the boy to the afflictions of the world” p. 50). Processing only the literal meaning of the novel must end in rejecting the protagonist as a repulsive individual. Indeed, irony may be lost on some audiences, who would miss the theme of the piece if their search for an appropriate interpretation stops at the literal level. However, if read as an ironic piece, the theme of the novel makes a lot more sense, and its social implications more relevant. Portraying a repulsive protagonist does not aim only at evoking disgust in the reader. Precisely a cruel creature such as this protagonist helps highlight the excessive ferocity of the reality examined and criticized. If the literal meaning is the more positive option, it measures the extent to which the reality criticized has fallen short of expectations (Giora, 1995; Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, and Brown, 1995).

Dolly City (1992) is an examination of the patriarchal concept of motherhood. Particularly, the notion of the ‘ideal’ mother, the one who, as posited by patriarchy, must be loving by nature, and consequently must be the primary caretaker, incessantly protecting her child from the world at large — the one who must always worry about her child’s health, and be wary of the infinite possibilities of evil that might befall her/him — is under scrutiny here. It soon becomes clear that the ‘ideal’ mother must be deranged. It must take an insane person to be a mother by the book. And any mother must go mad, even if she is not the biological mother, as is the case with Dolly, the protagonist of *Dolly City*.

Indeed, Dolly — the realization of the patriarchal ideal mother — is mad, but is driven even madder by both her uncontrollable maternal instinct and the infinite possible calamities from which she has to protect her son. The ideal mother would do anything within her capacity to protect her child. Nothing can deter her. An ideal mother has no limits. It turns out, such limitless love — so internal to the concept of patriarchal maternal love — can be but beneficial. “‘It’s madness’ . . . how far the female human mind can go, ha, mother?” (p. 51).

She is, one should keep in mind, a preferred candidate for the role of the ideal mother, because she is a physician. As such, she is best equipped to protect her son against all kinds of diseases. Armed with instinctual love and medical knowledge, she is, indeed, determined to do away with any possibility that might threaten her son’s well being:

I made up my mind to get over that terrible fear of losing my child by doing whatever I can to protect him against any kind of disease. I knew I would never be

able to keep up with fate, but I was determined, nevertheless, to fight it. I said to myself that the world is full of humps and bottomless holes, pits behind the loquat tree, but, I, as a mother, must fight all these troubles, I have to protect this child against countless ailments and natural disasters . . .

Between myself and me I have decided that for a start, I should immunizing him against as many diseases as possible . . . I injected [all the vaccines] at once — though I knew I must not do it. I couldn't stop myself, couldn't get over the motherly impulse. (p. 18)

Castel-Bloom examines a mother's relentless, never-to-be-subdued anxiety over the well being of her child:

I started checking him up. All was well. The child was O.K., his heart was a sweetheart, I have heard no pathological sound. Nevertheless, though the baby was as sound as a bell, I decided to cut him up. I was seized by that chronic doubt I am suffering of. I wanted to inspect my inspection, and then make sure that the inspection was the best possible one, and so on.

I treated him with anesthesia, I put him to sleep, I did it to him. I wrapped my hands in white gloves, and started sawing his chest. I could see his inner parts, the heart, the lungs. Having opened him up, I dug in there. And then I picked at his stomach . . .

Everything was in its place, there was no exception. I verified it again and again, repeated the check up hundreds of times, opened books, compared findings — all was 100 per cent fine.

All this lasted 6 hours. I closed him up, and gave him infusion so that he recover. I was calm . . . I looked the huge scar up and down. Instead of feeling sorry that he would not be able to wear a bikini — I was eaten up by the doubt — it swallowed me, as the sky swallowed Saint Exupéry. I was overwhelmed with regret that I didn't use the occasion to operate on his head. (p. 25)

The ideal mother's worries are endless. Soothing one worry just makes place for another. "And so, in spite of the fact that the child did not have cancer, he did not have cancer, in spite of the fact that he did not have cancer, I decided nevertheless to treat him with chemotherapy, and large doses of vitamin A. I wanted to be on the safe side" (p.38).

For this same reason she goes on to dig into his kidneys. She is seized by the fear that the child is missing one. She then decides he needs an implant. Having accomplished that by means of a bizarre operation, she is again seized by the fear that this operation was unnecessary, and that now he has three kidneys. She operates on him again, taking out the spare one. "If this child is doomed to die on the operating table — what can I do? I am doing my best" (p. 37).

Doing her best — stretching her capacities to the limit — is a requirement of the ideal mother that Castel-Bloom questions. "What sort of a thing is motherhood, if you cannot guard your child continuously and in a perfect manner" (p.116). The

results are outrageous, but only a logical consequence of this notion of motherhood.

Whenever the scene seems to reach the peak of insane savageness, we are made to remember that this is a mild version of the reality we live in:

[B]efore I go on, I would like to emphasize something: It is important for me that you don't get the impression that I took a child and ruined him. I only wanted to protect him from bad things. I wanted him to live to be a hundred and twenty, and what's wrong with that? I demanded command over all the domains, and what's wrong with that? What is this hypocrisy? In certain communities they are capable of making a man cut off his sister's clitoris with his teeth — am I not allowed then to insist on having monopoly over the protection of my own son? (p. 39)

Dolly City, then, is not just the rejection of the notion of patriarchal motherhood via exaggeration. On the contrary, what looks absurd is depicted ironically as less absurd than other man-made atrocities, such as the widespread subjugation of women, or, as illustrated below, the sacrifice of the sons by the mothers who cooperate with sending them to the war. Consider the scene in the mental hospital in which the psychiatrist is trying to make Dolly accommodate the 'facts of life', so that she should stop worrying:

You have to remember that it is possible for your child to die in battle. He may die in battle, you have to put this into your head. He may die of drowning, or of a shark, if he falls into the water. You also have to put into your head that he may die of cancer, but it is likely that if he dies soon, he will die in battle . . . And then if he dies in battle — you will be a bereaved mother, insomuch as if you die, he will be an orphan. Things have names! Things have identities. For God's sake, Dolly. (p. 98)

But the fear to lose her child engulfs the mother totally. And since motherhood is not a sentiment but an instinct, and a most potent one, separation is unthinkable. Trying to establish some contact with her son, who must be spending his time fighting on a warship somewhere in the ocean, Dolly reaches the High Officer quarters. The clerk there cannot be helpful, but the mother is expected to be omnipotent — to be able to locate her son by means of her motherly instincts by just looking at the map.

When she is told that the warship, to which her son was enrolled, has been drowned, she decides to commit suicide: If, after all, she has not managed to protect her son, her life is pointless. "I thought of all the operations and vaccines I have treated him to, and how he died in a stupid way" (p. 120). But she doesn't die eventually. When she jumps into the river, there is her son under the water to save her. He has, in fact, been assigned the duty of a lifeguard, who should save people who commit suicide, and has not been on the ship. Having saved his mother, he hospitalizes her in a geriatric home "out of a sense of poetic justice" (p. 122).

Only at this stage, the mother finally gains her peace of mind: "I have hardly had any contact with him. He freed himself of me, there was no doubt about it, he was his own master, and I didn't bother about him any more. I thought whatever will be will be, what else can I do" (p. 122).

But it is not just the loss of control over her child that rids her of her worries (and see also Firestone, 1972). She can rest at last, because her son is now immune to catastrophes. Even though at this stage of his life he is on the run (having tried to hijack a plane), she cannot care less. "I knew that after all I did to him, a bullet or a knife in the back — this isn't something he cannot cope with" (p. 123). After all, she has fulfilled her duties as the ideal mother: Having such an insanely monstrous worrier for a mother made him immune against all possible calamities. Ironically, then, the ideal mother must be a perfect brute.

Castel-Bloom derides the concept of motherhood as shaped by patriarchy. She questions the assumptions underlying this concept, examining (i) the alleged maternal *instinct*, (ii) the compulsive uncontrollable *worry* of a mother over her child's well-being, which results in her (iii) incessant attempts to do as *best* she can, to make the *maximum* effort, to shield her/him. But, *Dolly City* is not just an exposure of the monstrosity of the ideal mother as a logical consequence of patriarchal values. Rather, it is patriarchy as a mindset that *Dolly City* questions and protests. The global theme of the novel, challenging patriarchy, is also conveyed indirectly, by using irony.

Challenging patriarchy

Dolly City is, in fact, a radical challenge of the whole of patriarchal ideology as it is practiced in Israel and anywhere else. It attacks the dictates of maternal love which knows no boundaries, the love of men for their (promised) land, and the hate of the 'other' (Women, Arabs, Germans). It implies that the atrocities *Dolly City* endures stem from the practices of patriarchy (Zmiri, 1993).

To highlight the theme of the book, an ironic attitude is assumed. This device allows to commend what *seems* as outrageously cruel in *Dolly City* as desirable — as cruelty on a very small scale — compared to the accepted atrocities committed, unquestionably, under the auspices of patriarchy. For instance, when taken literally, *Dolly's* insane love for her son must be rejected. But in light of "the political insanity on whose behalf good mothers endanger the lives of their sons for the sake of the map of entire Israel", *Dolly's* love cannot be condemned (Melamed, 1992:30). Instead, the love of the mothers who comply with the dictates of patriarchy becomes the object of criticism.

This garden path device which makes the reader access a literal interpretation which has to be revised marks the novel from its start. In the opening scene, Dolly practices a violent ritual, in which she cuts up a dead gold fish and swallows the pieces of the body. This is indeed repulsive. However, following is a description of similar but more brutal rituals of the ancestors of patriarchy: "In very ancient times, in the land of Cana'an, just people sacrificed bigger animals than this to god. When they chopped the body of the lamb, big, substantial parts remained in their hands, bleeding, and their treaty was a treaty" (p. 9). Taken ironically, then, her brutality is minute compared to the brutalities of the patriarchs which we have learnt to accept unquestioningly.

The oppression of the human other is also criticized as stemming from patriarchy (e.g., recall the reference to those communities where women's clitoris is cut off, p. 39). Castel-Bloom criticizes the oppressive nature of the mother-Dolly-like attitude of the state of Israel and the Israelis to the land of Israel vis à vis the Palestinians. She points to its inevitable destructiveness. Engraving the Israeli map on her son's back, Dolly has laid the foundation for comparing her love for her son to the Israelis' love of their land — which she claims is as insane and harmful. But while we criticize Dolly's cruel treatment of her son, we accept the public insanity as a norm. Only a retreat, the book suggests — of the 'ideal' maternal love to the boundaries of the 'good enough' mother, of the nation from the 'ideal' boundaries to the 'good enough' boundaries of '67—will result in recovery of both the mother/woman and the state. Indeed, Dolly's son's autonomy (and consequently hers) coincides with the reshaping of the map of Israel, engraved on his back, indicating a retreat to the '67 borders (p.89).¹⁰⁵

Dolly City's irony resembles Swift's in *A modest proposal*. The surface literal meaning is shockingly repulsive in both works, but is nevertheless a more desirable state of affairs than the one actually practiced and which is criticized by the ironic text. What *Dolly City* implies, then, is that the actual horrors of motherhood, as delineated by patriarchy, are a lot worse than those described; Dolly's insanity is negligible compared to the insanity of Israeli mothers who conform to the patriarchal requirement that they should send their sons to the war — sacrifice their sons for chauvinistic purposes; her insanity is insignificant compared to the insanity of the Israeli state, of which Dolly's insanity is only an outcome.

105. Apart from the treatment of the 'other' in a patriarchal society, Castel-Bloom also criticizes patriarchy treatment of civilization and ecology (e.g., Melamed, 1992), but these are beyond the scope of this chapter.

The reception of *Dolly City*

Recall that irony runs the risk of being missed or misunderstood. Hirshfeld (1992:8) indeed warns against such misunderstanding of *Dolly City*.¹⁰⁶ He maintains that “it would be a mistake to read this story as a story about the maternal anxiety which turns violent, articulated in a somewhat extreme and grotesque articulation . . . Maternal anxiety which turns stifling requires no more than a decent realism. In contrast, a healthy normal maternal love, fluent and full, which contains concern, and sensitivity and will — is reconstructed via a reversal in this book, and with it the whole world is reshaped”.

Blat (1992), for one, has been fooled by the irony of *Dolly City*, and takes it for what it seems, rather than for what it is: “She is trying to frighten us — but there is no need to fear her tricks, since they are devoid of soul and spirit, and are on the verge of insanity . . . She is trying to cover up her wickedness by covering a wide area, inhabited by old men and youth, mother and child, times and events, and goes as far as Arabophobia — the fear of Arabs . . .” (p.6). But this, Blat maintains, has nothing to do with the Israeli everyday life. He takes Castel-Bloom’s novel to be “an insane fantasy which cannot be proved true, and is but a kitschy plot charged with effects cooked according to the recipe of postmodern categories” (p.8). “This is the gist of the theory of the absurd, incarnated in modern literature, and is the opposite of the Hebrew dictates ‘live by it’, which points to the positive aspects of life, and ‘choose life’ — which are the opposite of all existential assumptions that foresee loss and destruction . . . Castel-Bloom’s novel, with its up-to-date language and ‘freakish’ style, communicates to the reader but abysses of empty and alienated existence, which have nothing to do with the Israeli reality” (p.8).

Likewise, Nissim (1992:21) does not appreciate the irony in *Dolly City*, and regrets the lack of humanity on the part of the protagonist. “Dolly’s inhumanity . . . is so inhumane that she does not evoke sympathy. Even if the alienation of the protagonist is intended, there must be a humane aspect that will make it up for the reader so as to enable him [sic] to get close, if not to excite him [sic], at least to shock him [sic]”. He further complains that the novel lacks “an attitude of direct protest” and “preaching”. “The linguistic poverty of the protagonist, as well as her alienation from the reader, reduce the potential of the novel to question social ideas in a complex manner”.

Weissman (1992:24) relates to *Dolly City*’s indirect mode of expression. She complains about redundancy and lack of inventiveness in *Dolly City*. For her,

106. See also Zmiri (1993) who reports of various readers who have rejected *Dolly City* as unbearably cruel.

Dolly City is “a simple reversal of conventional values or their hyperbole . . . “[T]herefore there is really nothing threatening about it”. It involves “slaughtering of sacred cows and social criticism that takes/doesn’t-take itself seriously . . . Castel-Bloom has the ability to shock without being shocked, or to be shocked without shocking”. Weissman, in fact, relates to the indirectness of the ironic style, which results in a kind of mitigated criticism that does not rock the boat. Irony, indeed, neither shakes nor shocks. It need not be taken seriously. But, again, Weissman relates only to the absurdity of what is said. She seems to assume a theory of irony in which the speaker dissociates herself from what she says, which echoes received wisdom (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95; Wilson and Sperber, 1992). Such view of irony misses the point. *Dolly City* is not about dissociation from what is said or presented, but from what is.

Irony as a mode of indirect criticism might have its disadvantages. Though it helps protect the dissident, it may, at the same time, transmit a message that might not get through.

Summary

I have suggested that irony, being a mode of indirect negation (Giora, 1995), may serve to camouflage innovative and radical ideas threatening to question accepted norms and beliefs. According to Giora (1995), irony can mitigate the intended criticism, because its comprehension involves processing the surface literal meaning as well (for a similar view see, Dews and Winner, 1995, 1997; Jorgensen, 1996; Leech, 1983). Though the theory of irony used here to explain the social function of irony is based on research at the utterance level, the social functions of ironic discourses longer than an utterance need not differ drastically. Reading *Dolly City* by Orly Castel-Bloom as an ironic text indeed allows us to recover the subversive ideas which, while focusing on the patriarchal concept of motherhood, question patriarchy in general. The theory of irony examined here predicts that powerless groups (e.g., women) may use irony as a critical tool, because it enables them to be subversive without a cost (for a different view see Hutcheon, 1994). Viewing irony as indirect negation allows the reader a better insight into the themes of the novel. *Dolly City* does not just present patriarchal motherhood and patriarchy in general as absurd, as would be deduced from reading irony as ‘dissociation from what is said’ (Wilson and Sperber, 1992), or the opposite of what is said (e.g., Grice, 1975). Viewing ‘what is said’ as an option, compared to which what is criticized is worse, allows for a better understanding of *Dolly City*.

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