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Catalyst and Prosecutor of a Forbidden Love: The Landscape of Haifa in *Dearest Anne*

Qingyang (Freya) Zhou

The release of *Dearest Anne*, a novel by female Israeli author Judith Katzir, generated tremendous controversy in the early 2000s. Literary luminaries such as Amos Oz, Haim Be'er, Shulamit Lapid, and S. Yizhar praised Katzir's tender portrayal of lesbian love and her delicate delineation of the female narrator Rivka Shenhar (Rivi)'s gradual maturation.¹ The LGBT community in Israel, however, criticized the novel's tragic denouement, denouncing the disintegration of the central characters' homosexual relationship as heteronormative and regressive.² Conservative readers also voiced concerns over the novel's association of Anne Frank's diary, a canonical work within the study of the Holocaust, with a troubled, disturbing intergenerational lesbian narrative ripe with lurid descriptions of sexual desires.³

The various reactions that *Dearest Anne* elicited reflect the novel's ambivalent stance on lesbian love. *Dearest Anne's* reimagining of Anne Frank's truncated sexuality through Rivi's budding sexuality for the majority of the novel is audacious and liberating. At the same time, the novel's historical setting of the 1970s, a time in which nationalist, conservative sentiments dominated the political situation in Israel,⁴ precludes blissful destinies for its two protagonists. *Dearest Anne's* dualistic approach to female homosexuality is particularly evident in its use of the landscape of Haifa. Interwoven throughout the narrative, Haifa's urban milieu bejewels the

heroine's rich imaginations and actively contributes to the development, consummation, and abrupt ending of Rivi and her older inamorata Michaela's relationship. The wadi, the sea, the cypress and pine trees, and Mount Carmel bestow upon Haifa a dynamic and capricious character similar to that of a woman, at times rendering the lesbian couple's joyful memories of reunion, while at other times serving as the source of fear for the cursed lovers. In Judith Katzir's nostalgic narrative, Haifa becomes both the catalyst and prosecutor of Rivi and Michaela's impermissible sexuality.

Commonly regarded by scholars as a *Bildungsroman*,⁵ *Dearest Anne* recounts the coming-of-age story of the narrator and protagonist, Rivi. The novel is presented in the form of diaries/letters addressed to Anne Frank, tracing Rivi's life from April 1977, shortly after her Bat Mitzvah, until around 2001, when she is already a mother of two daughters. At the beginning of the story, Rivi's estrangement from her divorced parents prompts the development of a passion for her married literature teacher, Michaela Berg, the only person who consoles Rivi with a sincere heart during times of hardship. Drawn by the tender affection of her teenage student, Michaela soon also falls in love with Rivi and commences a clandestine relationship with her then fourteen-year-old student. To conceal her liaison with Rivi, Michaela allows herself to be impregnated by her husband Yoel, and subsequently gives birth to an autistic boy. Unfortunately, the school principal eventually detects Michaela and Rivi's surreptitious relationship. To avoid further embarrassment and reproach, Michaela promptly emigrates to New York with her family. A decade-long separation of the two paramours ensues, punctuated only by rare visits. The novel ends with Rivi attending the funeral of Michaela, who has died of breast cancer.

The image of Haifa is directly connected to the motifs of forbidden love and guilt that characterize Rivi and Michaela's relationship. In a significant diary entry on September 8, 1978, Rivi summarizes her story with Michaela as a "love between mountain and sea," both because their love takes place "in

a peaceful little town between mountain and sea,” and because their physical characteristics resemble the natural landscape of Haifa.⁶ Michaela’s last name, Berg, which means mountain in her native language of German, along with her brown eyes, which resemble the earth and tree trunks, makes her the “mountain.” At the same time, Rivi’s blue-gray eyes and “stormy” soul anoint her as “the sea” in their relationship.⁷

Nevertheless, this romantic characterization of the couple is overshadowed by Rivi’s upsetting recognition that their love is forbidden. Rivi’s description, in which the sea and the mountain “*succeed in touching each other*,”⁸ rather than naturally and closely embracing each other as in Haifa, implies that the meeting of the two is a strenuous effort that requires overcoming certain invisible barriers. Indeed, Michaela and Rivi strive to conceal their affair and combat the moral impeachments of society. That the natural landscape of Haifa is simultaneously connected to love and sin renders a dualistic personality to the city, which serves both as the breeding ground of the heroines’ homosexuality and as a locus of anxiety, fear, and doom.

At the beginning of the story, Haifa’s idiosyncratic color palette, consisted of the blue sea, the green Mount Carmel, the white sky, and the orange sunshine, intensifies Rivi’s budding passion towards Michaela. The connection between the orange color and erotic desire is evident in Rivi’s diary entry from August 15, 1977. Reading Thomas Mann’s *Confessions of Felix Krull*, which Michaela recommends, Rivi wonders at the titillating love story between an old man and a young boy while picking the “elongated, orange, ripe-to-bursting” mangos above her, slicing the flesh, sucking and licking the hairy pit, and enjoying the “festive, orange taste, the taste of sun, the taste of life.”⁹ The juxtaposition of homosexuality in Mann’s novel and the background presence of Michaela as the recommender of the reading instills a romantic undertone into the passage. At the same time, the descriptions of orange-colored mangos as if they resemble plump, voluptuous human bodies craving for fulfillment of fleshy desires highlight Rivi’s burgeoning infatuation with

her teacher.

The combination of Haifa's vivid hues — blue, green, white, and orange — directly contributes to the intensification of Rivi and Michaela's love in two important scenes at the beginning of their relationship: Rivi's first secret view of Michaela's house and the couple's first kiss. Initially bereft of love and attention after her parents' divorce, Rivi regains confidence in herself and becomes enraptured by Michaela's charisma after the teacher kisses her on the forehead on Holocaust Memorial Day. One day after school, Rivi trails Michaela, discovering a home surrounded by "pines whose crests meet above the road in a *green* tunnel," at whose feet "the *sea* gleams like a broken piece of mirror."¹⁰ The *white* iron gate, table, and houses, *blue* mailbox, *sky-blue* flowers, and "thin shafts of sunshine" complement the portrait of this drowsy spring afternoon, when "the girl's heart races" for her teacher beyond control.¹¹ The emotional effect of this visit is immediately revealed in the following entry, in which Rivi describes in detail her sexual experiments in childhood and her erotic imaginations of Michaela.¹² Hence, Rivi's secret visit to Michaela's house marks the end of her platonic love for her teacher. The fact that Haifa's color palette features prominently in the descriptions of Michaela's house demonstrates the city's power to propel the development of Rivi's homosexuality. When Rivi and Michaela's affective undercurrents burst into a long, exuberant kiss under the canopy of pines near the dirt path down to the wadi, the sensation is so overwhelming that Rivi resorts to third-person narration to milder her sense of guilt: "The girl closes her naked eyes against the sun. Her eyes fill with orange. Hot orange in her mouth. Hot orange pulsing in her panties, in the seam of her jeans."¹³ The recurrent motifs of pine trees, the wadi, the sea, and the sun, as well as the same set of white, blue, green, and orange colors in these two central scenes reveal the extent to which Haifa's landscape transcends its status as the mere backdrop of the action and assumes an active role in nurturing the intergenerational love of the protagonists.

The tender Haifaian landscape once catalyzes the formation of Rivi and Michaela's homosexual relationship. It nevertheless turns into an ominous figure who condemns the eccentric love to a tragic ending, when Michaela's pregnancy adds increasing burdens on the already emotionally strained couple. On Michaela's twenty-eighth birthday, the lovers decide to drive down to the bay. Instead of the customary presence of the gleaming sun, "a strong wind battered the car and the sea raged," compelling Michaela and Rivi to cuddle up together on the back seat instead of under a pine tree, the customary locale of their courtship.¹⁴ The once tranquil, gently beating waves are now "as high as houses," resembling floods. Just as when Rivi shouts out her unquenchable love for Michaela to the sea, the roar of the wind and the crashing waves drown her passionate confession. The scene reaches an emotional climax as Michaela runs to Rivi with a swollen belly, kissing her in a tight embrace. However, rather than being rewarded with each others' sweet lips and the fresh fragrance of nature, Rivi and Michaela become soaking wet under the suddenly pouring rain, their bodies almost sent aloft by the wild blast, their eyes blurred by the rapidly falling raindrops.

Rivi's elaborate, delightful, and romantic descriptions of her previous encounters with Michaela give way to a short, interrupted, and confused memory of an unpleasant birthday celebration. As if punishing this distorted relationship, Haifa's landscape assumes the posture of an unforgiving matriarch, a censorious judge, or a scolding prosecutor, sentencing the heroines to a doomed path leading to their catastrophic destiny of shattered dreams and decade-long separation. Indeed, the beginning of the end looms large at the start of the ensuing diary entry: "My fears have been realized: Nira my homeroom teacher called my mother in for a talk about the deterioration in my schoolwork and my frequent absences from the last class of the day."¹⁵

Functioning as both the catalyst and the prosecutor of Rivi and Michaela's forbidden intergenerational and homosexual love, the natural landscape of Haifa propels the development of the heroines' relationship from

budding feelings to an extended extramarital affair, while also foreshadowing the eventual failure of the love's fruition. The centrality of the city of Haifa in the identity formation process and in the life events of the novel's protagonists renders the love at the heart of the narrative distinctly Haifaian, unable to exist in any other city. As such, *Dearest Anne* glorifies the image of Haifa in the 1970s and immortalizes the city as a significant topos in Israeli literature.

Qingyang Zhou (Freya) is a senior from Shenzhen, China, majoring in German, Cinema & Media Studies, and Comparative Literature. She is disappointed that Penn does not permit students to have five majors. Freya epitomizes Wanderlust: after studying Israeli literature in a Penn Global Seminar, spending a semester abroad in Germany, taking two Penn Summer Abroad courses in Europe, and working in a GRIP internship in Morocco, she now plans to venture into the study of North Korean cinema for her Ph.D. dissertation, which will be written in six years.

Endnotes

1. Hannah Ovnat-Tamir, "Afterword: Reading *Dearest Anne*: The Novel as a Historical Document," in *Dearest Anne*, by Judith Katzir (New York: The Feminist Press, 2008), 325.
2. *Ibid*, 326.
3. *Ibid*, 320.
4. *Ibid*, 315-318.
5. *Ibid*, 321-325; Nili Gold, "The Topography of the City and the Body: Yehudit Katzir's Haifa," *Hebrew Studies* 47, (2006): 282.
6. Judith Katzir, *Dearest Anne: A Tale of Impossible Love*, trans. Dalya Bilu (New York: The Feminist Press, 2008), 181. Italics added by the author.
7. *Ibid*.
8. *Ibid*.
9. *Ibid*, 96.
10. *Ibid*, 71, emphasis added.
11. *Ibid*, 71-72.

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12. Ibid, 72-76.
 13. Ibid, 120.
 14. Ibid, 200.
 15. Ibid, 201.