Incorporating the Impossible: Female Suicide Terrorism in *Before We Say Goodbye*

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Before We Say Goodbye* (2004) is endorsed by Amnesty International for contributing to a better understanding of human rights values. It tells the news item story of a Palestinian girl blowing up herself and an Israeli girl in a supermarket. Through exclusion, alienation and destruction, inclusion of both (groups of) individuals in human rights discourse is being sabotaged by the Israeli state, as well as by the Palestinian individual, who are polarized in the tension of being at once each other's victim and perpetrator. This paper explores this complex web of human rights violations and finally explains how, and at what cost, the representation of the suicide attack that addresses the seemingly irresolvable dichotomy is precisely what makes this novel a claim for human rights.

"Endorsed by Amnesty International UK as contributing to a better understanding of human rights and the values that underpin them," appears on the back cover of the novel *Before We Say Goodbye* (2004) by the Italian author/journalist Gabriella

Ambrosio. On its website, Amnesty International promotes the novel in the spirit of its conviction that literature helps develop tolerance and overcome prejudice, quoting Desmond Tutu in stating that "stories can bring understanding, healing, reconciliation and unity" (Amnesty International UK). Vered Cohen-Barzilay, former Amnesty Director of Communication and Publications, board member of Art for Amnesty and founder of the e-publishing house Novel Rights, endorses the novel as a prime example of human rights literature. Cohen-Barzilay first introduced this concept in her foreword to the Amnesty-supported short stories anthology *Freedom* (2010). She defines it as a literary genre that directly or indirectly promotes values of human rights and combines aesthetics (albeit subordinated to content) with a driving force to motivate and inspire the reader to fight for a better future for all humanity (Cohen-Barzilay).

Judging from its definition, it seems that human rights literature addresses readers who already hold the rights, and are in the position to grant them to others who do not—the main subjects. It has been broadly recognized that human rights discourse is as normative as any, excluding those who do not count as human to define humanity and its rights. Human rights discourse is tautological in that it addresses those who are already considered to be human.[1] Joseph Slaughter, scholar in comparative literature and legal rights, has pointed out that this addressee is not the human in a natural state, but rather the human in society (21, 132). Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that everyone has the right to develop this personality which Slaughter has identified as the legal dimension of the otherwise abstract human, implying the human as the dignified, rights-holding person before the law. This position is, paradoxically, both the premise and the outcome of the UDHR: the human is assumed to naturally be the rights-holding person (Slaughter 20, 26, 60–1, 77;

1. As pointed out by Jacques Rancière, Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben and Michael Foucault were among the first to specifically address this norm of humanity (Rancière 72).

Douzinas 8). To obtain this free and self-determining personality, the human being must be incorporated in human rights society and its values by subjecting himself to this discourse. According to Slaughter, the *Bildungsroman* is built on a similar form of incorporation. It depicts the emergence of the individual in society, who thus claims the right to be a free and self-determined person. Human rights law and the *Bildungsroman* as part of its discourse share this paradox: they exclude the marginalized, those lacking the qualities of the incorporated person, in order to be normative, and the protagonist is subjected to this discourse in order to become a free, self-regulating human rights person.

But what if this process of incorporation, the *Bildung*, is sabotaged by both society and the individual? *Before We Say Goodbye*, based on a newspaper article, narrates a day in the life of several inhabitants of Jerusalem, both Israeli and Palestinian. It ends with a Palestinian girl blowing up herself and an Israeli girl in a supermarket. This situation, taken straight from the newspaper, provides the reader with a complex web of human rights violations. Society, or more specifically, the nation-state, is a major actor in the incorporation process, providing the individual with the possibility to develop his personality and gain his rights. But although the Palestinians may constitute a nation, they lack a state to grant them their rights; in fact, in many cases their rights are violated by the very state they inhabit. This part of incorporation seems to be rendered impossible. Through her suicide attack, the Palestinian girl tries to draw attention to her people's lack of space in which to develop a feeling of human dignity, killing an innocent Israeli girl in the act. Murder, especially in the context of suicide terrorism, can hardly be considered human in the discourse of human rights (I will elaborate on this below), and if the individual does not conform to the norms of humanity formulated by the UDHR, incorporation from the perspective of the individual is impossible. Both Israeli society and the Palestinian individual challenge human rights values and thus sabotage the incorporation process, polarized in the tension of being each other's victim *and* perpetrator. Departing from Slaughter's

convincing assumptions and arguments, I will investigate how this novel asks for the recognition of the humanity of both, precisely *through* the representation of the suicide attack that both creates and addresses this dichotomy. To explore this question, I will proceed to discuss both actors: society and the individual.

Part of Slaughter's idea of incorporation is the emerging of the "individual" in modern chronological time (Slaughter 108–9), however this novel depicts only one day. The omniscient narrator quickly establishes that there is no progression or *Bildung* possible. "There was no difference between yesterday, today and tomorrow, […] the past was a hole, the present didn't exist and the future was the same" (Ambrosio 19). The inhabitants of the Palestinian refugee camps cannot make plans; their curfew is called randomly, life is constantly suspended. Furthermore, there seems to be no resolution in sight: "It'll take time […] but what time, what is time, not something that belongs to us […]. Who is it that decides how time passes here?" (84) The Israeli soldiers are in charge of Palestinian time and space, which, as a result, do not offer the Palestinians any tools to allow them to participate in the community of speech that creates a meaningful collective, resulting in social death and bare individuality: "human rightslessness" (see Slaughter & McClennen 154). Slaughter has argued that "expulsion from the community of speech represents the fiercest assault on the human personality because it excludes the individual from a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective" (Slaughter & McClennen 158–9). The culmination of irreconcilable communicative difference between Palestinians and Israelis is represented in *Before We Say Goodbye* by the celebration of the Jewish *War of Independence*, a term referring to what the Palestinians call the *Nakba*, the catastrophe (Ambrosio 19). The novel emphasizes that a nation like Israel cannot harbour incorporation: "perhaps it is in our DNA by now—fear, rejection. Destruction. Who do you think came to populate the land of Israel? Idealists… the traumatized… dreamers… fanatics" (101).[2] And now, the Palestinian condition begins to resemble that of the diasporic Jew. The place where individuals can normally

enjoy human rights has now become the place where these rights are violated, and both the Israelis and Palestinians have interiorized the difference and exclusion enforced from the outside.

The lack of a way to manifest one's voice thus has its effect on all characters, Palestinian and Israeli. Dima, an 18-year-old Palestinian girl who lives in a refugee camp, always admired news items for their ability to make injustice public. But on the day that is described, she realizes something. Addressing the newsreader, Dima wonders:

> What is a news item before it becomes news, Leila, when it is still a blend of anger, vengeance, action, suffering, hypocrisy, cowardice, fear, hope, signs? When you come and cook it into news and carry it around the world, it has already lost its strength; you have already stripped it of the howl and the urgency that involves understanding. (66)

Dima realizes that it takes more than news to create acute awareness of the Palestinian situation: it takes immediacy, a "now", a momentum. Dima decides to draw this attention by blowing herself up—"a date with the future, in her own way, somewhere" (28). She commits the suicide attack in a supermarket, taking with her only two Israelis: a guard, and Myriam, who is about the same age as Dima and not much less troubled. Myriam has a hard time reconciling her Jewishness with her obtained American identity, refusing to choose. Finally, Dima's suicide attack deprives her of both. The fact that Palestinians and Israelis cannot seem to both participate effectively in society as persons and enjoy their rights, means that neither can.

To recall Slaughter's terms, the suicide attack represents a severe problem of incorporation on the part of the individual, which is intrinsically bound up with the lack of a social environment to be

2. It is interesting to note that, as several philosophers and Holocaust-survivors have pointed out, the lowest form of Jewish human life in the Nazi camps, those who had passed into the inhuman, were called *Muselmänner*: Muslims (Simpson 162–5).

incorporated in. Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) holds that "education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and of the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (qtd. in Slaughter 248). Dima's act of destroying the self and others as a means to educate can hardly be called a recognition of the dignity of the human personality. Indeed, to have human rights means to have bodily self-possession, to affirm that your body is yours, including the "right" to commit suicide.[3] However, few would argue that suicide is a positive affirmation of bodily self-possession: you cease to be human, so you gain nothing. How can suicide terrorism then be fit within the human rights framework?

Suicide terrorism is often interpreted as a reaction to modernity that uses modern tools to battle it. Especially since 9/11 it has been observed how the increased possibilities of transnational contact through modern media are used against the West by the extensive, transnational networks of terrorism (Baudrillard 403–426). In addition, suicide terrorists produce their own deaths, using the self-possession of their body as a means to destroy, to obtain political goals or media attention (Naaman 938). There is no "right" response to this; producing your own death is cheating according to the Western zero death aim. Terrorism, as Judith Butler has remarked, is a term reserved for "them", not for "us" as the West; it marks that which falls outside of our discourse of justified violence (*Precarious Life* 4, 13–4). Our moral responses are regulated by interpretative frameworks; "normal" deaths in war, caused by legitimate states, are less repulsive to us than suicide terrorism that is not state-sponsored (to the contrary), and thus unjustified and illegitimate (Butler, *Frames of War* 41, 49). Baudrillard has pointed out that, whereas Muslim suicide terrorists exchange their

3. Before the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), the first real human rights document, the body was subjected to the law. It allowed the state to punish bodies by sacrificing them for the good of the community or religion, and it rendered suicide a crime (Hunt 74, 97).

lives for Paradise, "Western" deaths are without hope (417). We cannot recognize terrorist attacks as the product of a rational, coherent political position; the attackers' religious motives are inexplicable to us, beyond reason, morality and social norms, shattering our "liberal-democratic consensus" (Žižek 154). Therefore, Western media discourse around suicide terrorism is often devoid of historical perspective (Naaman 938–9). However, throughout history, as Islam scholar Olivier Roy has recognized, the attacks have more often been motivated by foreign occupation than by religion (44). Secular, nationalist groups have used religion to justify suicide bombings; many terrorists, including the 9/11 hijackers, are not particularly observant of faith, and in most countries suicide terrorism was unknown until foreign invasions (Mogahed & Esposito 76–9). State terrorism, terrorists who become allies (e.g. Nelson Mandela) and vice versa (e.g. Bin Laden) further complicate the matter.

Female suicide bombing adds to the complexity of the issue. The idea of suicide terrorism stands in stark contrast with the constructed label of the woman as victim. Female suicide bombers challenge the traditional male/female dichotomy, and the media cannot explain the phenomenon: Israeli film theorist Dorit Naaman has argued that, while the motives of male suicide bombers are assumed to be clearly political and religious, the image of a young and beautiful woman cannot be reconciled with a fundamentalist dark side (939, 934–5, 842). Both Western and Arab media rely on stereotypical, conventional narrative frames because they "cannot tolerate Palestinian female suicide bombers in the context either of Islamic terrorism or of their deviation from desired feminine behaviour" (843). The oxymoron that is the female suicide bomber seems to call for an individual (psychological) explanation, leaving the audience oblivious to a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon and enabling it to avoid uncomfortable issues of agency and subjectivity (936). However, Naaman adds, women, like men, act out of nationalist zeal as well as personal motivations (944–6). "A comprehensive approach to the Palestinian female suicide bomber cannot reduce or even prioritize gender oppression over other […]

circumstances but rather needs to be accounted for in the complex web of power and social relations in Palestinian society" (945).

In *Before We Say Goodbye*, these fundamental issues are not addressed. Dima's attack is presented as an act of hopelessness and victimhood. Each time she thinks about something that makes her realize "her heart [is] warming" (38), she hastens to stop, implying that her act requires detachment from feelings rather than passion. Religion or nationalism are not mentioned once; they would have provided a meaning or purpose to her death. Instead of presenting the modern idea of self-possession as a weapon, the novel presents the suicide act as the opposite of self-possession: "She had already been dead for a good while; she no longer had arms she no longer had hands she no longer had legs to obey her will" (95), "Dima felt as if all her strings had been cut. Disconnected. She couldn't even sense the air around her anymore" (111). Dima is the victim of her own act, not the perpetrator; she has already left her body and surroundings. She does mention revenge, directed at the Israeli soldiers and authorities, but any agency she might have had in this regard is undone in the end, when "with horror she realized she was no longer in control of her movement" (109), her attack kills only two innocent civilians and is condemned by her own father to have been pointless. This kind of terrorism is not the faceless, inhuman terrorism shown on the news, nor is it ideological. It is, in fact, presented as the "regular" suicide of a depressed teenager. Dima being female does not complicate or challenge the suicide attack, but reinforces its passive motivations.

Before We Say Goodbye condemns suicide attacks as senseless and shows that the fight will keep being fought like this as long as the attackers have no "right" way to fight, no army to join (113). Dima wants her death to be her own decision, but is it? Has the act, as depicted in the novel, given her any agency or empowerment at all? The newspaper article the novel is based on mentions little details about the girls, Ayat Akhras ("Dima") and Rachel Levy ("Myriam"). They looked alike and their pictures were juxtaposed in the newspaper, victim and perpetrator (see Naaman). But the article does not mention that Levy was about to

join the military "which would have directly or indirectly put her in a position that would have endangered the lives of Palestinian civilians" (Naaman 942). In the novel, Myriam decides to refrain from joining. Perhaps women fighters, largely repressed in the media, "challenge the patriarchal army order in more profound ways than suicide bombers, ways that are harder to dismiss or subvert" (Naaman 950). Furthermore, Akhras' suicide video shows that she was protecting the honour of the family after her father was accused of collaborating with Israel. In the novel, her father indeed works with Israelis, but this is presented as admirable rather than as an accusation, supporting the novel's attempt to dissolve any hatred between the two sides. Besides, who could feel empathy for an honour killing? In her video, Akhras also mentions her wish for the Arab world to start helping Palestine, rather than watching girls fight (Hasso). This renders her suicide an act of strong spirit and resistance, which contradicts the idea of depression. Furthermore, it gives Palestinian terrorism a more specific face within the overarching term "terrorism". After all, whereas Akhras' act of terror trades in a life for another life, the terrorism of 9/11 is larger and extremer, because it exploits vulnerable and complex systems without a realistic goal (Derrida in Borradori 33–4).[4] Akhras also addresses how women in Palestine can be "used" for suicide bombing but not for active fighting, criticizing the idea that a female life is not worth living, but can in death be equal to that of men (Naaman 949). She thus criticizes the attitude of the Arab world while simultaneously complicating Western black-and-white notions of suicide terrorism and female victimization.

However, Akhras' critical motivations have not made it into the novel. By defining Dima's death in relatable terms, it enables the fiction that Western modernization as a universal tendency stands against an evil opponent. The Western reader, accustomed to the human rights narrative of self-possession, may not want a story about a girl blowing herself up

4. In the novel, this part of Akhras' video is quoted (142), providing it with the opportunity to elaborate on the issues addressed above. Instead, Dima's agency is undone again by her sudden change of heart and her powerlessness towards the end.

for society or religion. The suicide is presented as an act of wanting to show the world how horribly pointless the situation is, without revealing much about the conflict's nuances. Dima's death, that which could have given her agency, is reduced to an educational tool, teaching us that a Palestinian girl is the same as any (Western) girl. Indeed, "education is the only weapon we have in this life" (95), says Dima's father to the press after she dies. He even adds that, because she was a girl, she must have been desperate, and that her attack results from her feeling of not having any "dignity of the person," completely in the line of UHDR discourse. After all, this story, as a part of the human rights community, needs to obey the rules of speech to be recognized as such. In order to portray the female suicide bomber as human, it defines Dima's suicide in familiar terms, which separates it from terrorism's inhuman, anti-modern connotations.

Now, society is rotten, and the individual, even if she turned out (to our great relief) to be a depressed teen rather than a fanatic terrorist, is dead. How, then, can this novel be seen as a human rights claim? First of all, it tries to skip the step of the nation-state by creating a different kind of community. The importance of the nation-state is undermined; "we practically invented a language with which to talk to one another. But we already understood one another, because a destiny like ours is a bond stronger than any nation" (102). If communication binds citizens together, international human rights language could achieve the same on a supranational level. Secondly, through Dima, and on a meta-level, the novel sets forth the ability of news to generate such a human rights community as inferior to that of literature. Throughout history, reading literature has allowed people to recognize others as equals, paving the way for making new social and political concepts, such as human rights (Hunt 33–56). To Slaughter, ideally, the imaginative act of reading extends humanity to the not-yet-incorporated other, while expanding the humanity of the reader who assumes this humanitarian, interventionist posture (Slaughter 23, 274, 307). Through the recognition of equality, the reader gets a sense of immediacy, but at the same time, the novel

exists beyond immediacy, as opposed to volatile news items (Slaughter & McClennen 1–19).

Dima's suicide, as a deliberate sabotaging of her own incorporation, can then be seen as a fierce desire for Palestinian incorporation. It is as if the characters recognize that their stories cannot be heard through themselves. Abraham, the guard who dies in Dima's attack, has become a little deaf over the years but he does not care: "words flew and got soiled, and when they reached their destination they were no longer the same; you couldn't do anything about it. If [Abraham] had an opinion, he attached little importance to voicing it" (91). This quote supports Hunt's remark that "habit can familiarize men with the violation of their natural rights to the point that among those who have lost them no one dreams of reclaiming them or believes that he has suffered an injustice" (170). The novel connects this habit to the characters' violated right to narration. They have given up on the idea that their voice will be heard, and it is as if Dima realizes that this novel is her only chance: "Everyone values you […] as long as you behave like all the others who share this life with you. That's the way of the world […]; if you want approval, all you have to do is what they think you should do" (98). She reveals the novel's impossibility to go beyond similarities if it wants to adhere to human rights discourse. International human rights language replaces the individual voice; the international human rights society replaces the nation. By showing failed incorporation, the process Slaughter imagines is still there, only reversed; incorporation in the international sphere must create understanding and empathy, so that the international can "cure" the national with human rights. The absence of a healthy society for the individual to be incorporated in, is thus compensated by the imaginative society of international human rights literacy. The society to which our author already belongs.

Ambrosio, an Italian citizen (neither Palestinian nor Israeli), takes up the act of reclaiming humanity for the nameless suicide bombers from the newspapers. Their bodily destruction forces her to take over their voices through an omniscient narrator from within the discourse that defines humanity. In her afterword, Ambrosio explains that she had wanted to

delve deeper into familiar news: "What emerged […] was not just a story about Israel or Palestine, but a universal story […]. One that explores that which is more intimate and yet more universal, and which causes us to mirror our enemy." Ambrosio tries to convey the message that everyone is fundamentally the same by providing the names from the news item with faces and motivations. But her rewriting of the story from a position of incorporation necessarily excludes the real marginalized; the ones who do put the ground they love before people, the ones that do want to die for their religion, the ones who challenge "the generic forms in which 'human variation' is felt to be socially acceptable" (Slaughter 328). A novel about suicide terrorism might have pushed the limits of human rights discourse by depicting humanity within a different framework, both nuancing the reality of terrorism and expanding the idea of what it means to be human. *Before We Say Goodbye*, however, realizes that it needs limits. We can recognize people as being like us, because they are represented as such. This novel is part of the movement to promote the development of human rights' universality, but does not extend the not-yet-universal scope of this development.

Perhaps, as Cohen-Barzilay observes in the novel's praise section, this book does not blame or judge, and does shatter some preconceived notions.[5] "*Before We Say Goodbye* gives us a rare look and a wonderful opportunity to get to know reality from the bird's-eye view, with all its complexity and many faces," she promises. But unfortunately, the novel's view is limited and it shuns the unfamiliar "that makes [us] work to forge new ties of identification and to reimagine what it is to belong to a human community in which common epistemological and cultural grounds cannot always be assumed" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 38). Its hegemonic representation of the characters enables readers to "maintain both the comfortable gender status quo and their preconceived notions about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict" (Naaman 951). To paraphrase Butler: this story takes us home, where it tempts us to stay (*Precarious Life* 38).

5. In Israel and the Palestinian terrorities, human rights organizations use the novel to educate about human rights.

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