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Be'er-Sheva in Shulamit Lapid's Lizzie Badihi Series



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Synonyms

Be'er-Sheva the capital of the Negev; Be'er Sheva as periphery; Imagined and concrete Be'er-Sheva; Be'er-Sheva as a 'third space'

Definition

Shulamit Lapid's Lizzie Badihi detective series are taking place in Be'er-Sheva, the capital of the Negev area. The series can be divided into two parts: the first three novels regard the last years of the twentieth century and the last three reflect the beginning of the twenty-first century. The novels represent the economic, demographic, and even physical changes taking place in Be'er-Sheva, changes that reflect the changes in the Israeli society at the time.

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Introduction

Alongside Batya Gur, the Israeli writer Shulamit Lapid (b. 1934) was largely responsible for the new generation of Israeli detective and mystery fiction that developed in the late 1980s. When Lapid and Gur began publishing their first detective novels – in 1988 and 1989, respectively – they moved away from the “classic mysteries,” using the traditional crime form, to probe and expose the divisions within Israeli society rather than cleaving to the tight geometric patterns of whodunit fiction (Furstenberg 1996: 3). Following in their steps, many Israeli mystery writers have broadened the genre, expanding its boundaries to focus on character and theme development, employing it as a way of reflecting the social, political, and demographic divisions within the country. This new breed of detective novels thus closely correlates with the changes in contemporary Hebrew literature, touching on broad social themes and a consciousness fed by internal tensions. In this sense, it forms part of what Y. Oren names as the “disillusioned generation” in Israeli literature – writers who, having experienced the Yom Kippur War (1973) and change of government (1977), began questioning the foundational messianic values behind the establishment of the Zionist state, criticizing social gaps, and baring the problematic aspects of Israeli society (Oren 2009). Lapid's detective novels are thus not just a “light” form of entertainment but,

as R. Furstenberg claims, a means of “social criticism or psychological portraiture” (Furstenberg 1992: 53).

Ever since Raymond Chandler, we have been accustomed to associating the detective novel with the “mean streets” of the city. The detective writer serves as a cartographer of sorts, the protagonist of his works becoming a *flâneur* according to Walter Benjamin’s definition – one who walks the urban streets of the city acknowledging its diverse forces and heterogenic population (McDonough 2002: 101). Peter Turchi in his book *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer* claims that this map drawing is a form of storytelling, asking for a map being tantamount to requesting a narrative (Turchi 2004: 11). Moreover, according to Robert T. Tally as a literary work becomes infused with the places it explores, the story and place are frequently inextricably bound together (Tally 2013: 51). Applying this insight to her craft, the great crime writer P.D. James remarked: “. . . it is surely the power to create this sense of place . . . that gives any mystery writer the claim to be regarded as a serious novelist” (James 1983).

To date, Lapid’s detective series, starring Lizzie Badihi as the protagonist/detective, consists of six novels – *Mekomon* (Local Press; 1989), *Pitayon* (Bait, 1991), *Hatachshit* (The Gem, 1992), *Ḥol ba’eynaim* (Sand in Your Eyes, 1997), *Pilgesh bagiv’ah* (Concubine on the Hill, 2000), and *Sofonat halimonim* (End of the Lemon Season, 2007). All the novels take place in the city of Be’er-Sheva and the Negev area (Israel’s southern area, which is mainly a desert). The novels in the series span from the late 1980s until the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, I will try to demonstrate that they can be divided into two parts: the first three regard the last years of the twentieth century, while the last three reflect the beginning of the twenty-first century. According to Henry Lefebvre, “The spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space,” so the spatial stance relates to both the physical and human environments (Lefebvre 1991: 38). I will try to show that, in fact, the novels correspond to economic, demographic, and even

physical changes taking place in Be’er-Sheva and the Negev, changes which reflect the Israeli society, as a whole.

The City of Be’er-Sheva

The series is located in Be’er-Sheva, which is regarded the capital of the Negev, Israeli’s southern desert area. As Lapid herself acknowledged in an interview, however, the Be’er-Sheva of the novels is an imaginary city (Lapid 2007). Nonetheless, as Lucy Andrew and Catherine Phelps state in their introduction to *Crime Fiction in the City: Capital Crimes*, writing about a certain city does not necessitate its precise mirroring: “Crime narratives . . . are not only concerned with authentic representation of the city and the exposure of its secrets but also with the possibility of reconstructing, remapping and, hence, recreating the city” (Andrew and Phelps 2013: 3). Hence, although Lapid is speaking about the concrete city of Be’er-Sheva, she refers to very few specific sites, even inventing some of the settlements outside the city (e.g., Giv’at Benyamin and Tel Binyamin in *Concubine on the Hill*).

As a well-known biblical site (Gen 21:27–33, 26:18–33) of which archaeological remains still exist, Be’er-Sheva continued to be populated through the Roman and Byzantine periods. In the modern era, the Ottoman government resettled it, giving it the status of a city in 1906. Before 1948, it had approximately 6,000 residents, most of whom fled during the Israeli War of Independence (Morris 2008: 328). After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, it witnessed a period of growth, a new city being established near the old Turkish site in 1950. By 1955, two thirds of its inhabitants were Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews who had immigrated from Arab and Muslim countries (Meir-Glitzstein 2002: 133). However, a small elite group of Ashkenazi Jews (who came mostly from Europe) rule in the city, which as in many other cities, was governed by Mapai and the Histadrut and had a distinctly Eurocentric orientation. The establishment of the Soroka Hospital (1960) and the University of the Negev – now

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (1969) – did not alter the fabric of the city. Eitan Cohen in his book *Be'er-Sheva – The Fourth City* asserts that in fact two cities were created in Be'er-Sheva, one popular and the other elitist:

Some see Be'er-Sheva as a city whose residents do not want to live in it. Such an argument distorts reality, while at the same time sharpening the existence of two cities in Be'er-Sheva, whose image is opposed. Those who do not want to live in it, and indeed leave it physically or spiritually, are those 'veterans' who hoped that Be'er Sheva would develop something else – located in the campus. It is therefore not surprising that the gap between the university and the city is deeper in Be'er Sheva than in Haifa, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv. (Cohen 2006: 233)

However, the changes in Be'er-Sheva are part of the changes that have taken place in Israeli society as a whole. The late 1980s were a time of great cultural, economic, and political change, the elections of 1977 bringing the Likud party to power for the first time and deposing the Labor Party that had ruled since the establishment of the State. As Menachem Mautner observes:

In the brief course of one or two generations, then, the hegemonic group underwent a significant transformation in its perception of its identity and its constitutive cultural foundations from faith in socialism and far-reaching state involvement in the economy to a neo-liberal belief in capitalism, the free market, and 'small' government; from cherishing the collectivist values of contribution and sacrifice to endorsing individualism, self-realization and hedonism. (Mautner 2011: 114)

Herein, the Israeli Eurocentric outlook has become more Americanized, combining individualism and capitalistic economic system with a colorful multiculturalism.

These changes affected Be'er-Sheva as well. The Old City was turned into a city center replete with shops, restaurants, and offices, and an industrial center was created in what is known as Sarah's Valley on its southern perimeter. While this was originally populated by small factories, it has now been given life by an influx of high-tech companies. The city has also developed in other areas putting itself on the Israeli cultural map with its theater and symphony orchestra.

Another change can be seen in the city's demography: the second and third waves of immigration of the 1990s brought a new set of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. These created a new social reality associated with globalization – a process that sheds light on the State as a whole and the city in particular. They also changed Be'er-Sheva's demographic fabric, reducing the city's Mizrahi populace to a mere 40% (Gradus and Bluestein-Livnon 2001: 6, 33). Nevertheless, as Fran Markowitz claims, "despite the vibrancy of its diverse population of some 300,000, Beer-Sheva often comes up short as a city." She adds that the main reason for this is its location:

Israel's densely packed Tel-Aviv-Jerusalem corridor is always referred to as ha-Merkaz, or the centre of the country. By contrast, even if physically located in the middle of Israel, everyone knows that Beer-Sheva is in the south. Dubbed the gateway to, or the capital of, the Negev, the city and the southern region are metonymically linked. In fact, they are often used interchangeably to denote marginality, for even though Israel's Southern District encompasses 64 per cent of the country's landmass, only 14.3 per cent of the populace resides there. (Markowitz 2018: 153)

So although it is the capital of the Negev and seeking to become Israel's fourth metropolis, Be'er-Sheva is considered peripheral from the perspective of Tel Aviv or Jerusalem due to its location in the south of the country.

Orna Blumen argues that "The distinction between the center and periphery lies in the social division of the space—a disjuncture that is hierarchical, material, or symbolic (or all three)" (Blumen 2005: 22). Herein, she follows Said's hierarchical division between West (the center/high culture) and East (the periphery/low culture), the center conceiving of itself as superior to the periphery (Said 1978). This binary split is not always absolute, however, and the two entities frequently slip into one another; Bhabha thus coined the term "third space" in order to indicate how/where this hierarchy loses its force due to the blurring of the boundaries (Bhabha 2004: 28–56). This new space blends (parts of) the center and periphery together. As Daphna Levine notes: "Center – periphery relations are thus

marked by a fluidity and lability that reveals how the center as a whole is composed of the periphery or how on certain occasions the periphery becomes the cultural center" (Levine 2016: 22).

The fact that Be'er-Sheva is both the central city in the area and a periphery town gives it a hybrid character – a "third space" that, blurring the binary hierarchy between center and periphery, constitutes, according to Bhabha, the "discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (Bhabha 2004: 55). The third space can, of course, menace the center by its very existence. As Pnina Motzafi-Haller observes: "The ambivalence attached to the 'third space' poses a threat to the orderly and coherent representation of the hegemonic system of knowledge. The center seeks to define the powerless as 'Others' by enforcing rigidity and one-dimensionality" (Motzafi-Haller 2004: 342). By its very nature, the third space possesses a measure of independence that rebels against the hegemony of the center.

As a peripheral cultural center, Be'er-Sheva possesses a unique ambience, hosting a colorful populace comprised of old and new immigrants from diverse countries and backgrounds: Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, sabras (native Israelis), Bedouin, rich upper-class circles, and those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds. It thus offers an alternative to the cosmopolitanism of Tel Aviv and the religious aura of Jerusalem (Galili 2003).

The choice of Be'er-Sheva, with its third-space character, affords a fertile opportunity for addressing Israeli society and its conflicts. In fact, as a country Israel is in itself a hybrid blend of West and East:

Israel is Western in self-image, orientation and ties, science and technology, higher education, market economy, procedural democracy and Protestant ethic. But it is not Western in the absence of permanent borders, blurred criteria of membership in society, high natural increase, centrality of family, focal position of the military, state intervention in the economy, non-high standard of living, strong role of religion in public life, lack of robustness of

the law, weaknesses of democracy and salience of ethno-nationalism. (Smootha 2005: 441)

Israel as a whole may thus be regarded as a "third space," combining characteristics of both East and West and thus constituting an archetype of "ethnic democracy" (Smootha 1997: 233). In this context, Be'er-Sheva serves as a "microcosm of Israeli society, and the story of the interethnic relations in the town can be regarded as a test case for the integration of immigrants from Islamic countries in various aspects of Israeli society, especially public life" (Meir-Glitzstein 2002: 80). The hybridity of the third space allows Israeli society to be presented in miniature, reflecting features of the center and periphery alike. The city of Be'er-Sheva thus functions as an excellent vehicle for demonstrating the changes and developments occurring in Israeli society – in particular, the social and cultural transformations it has undergone.

As mentioned before, over the period the series spans, both Be'er-Sheva and Israeli society have changed and developed. The social and physical changes Be'er-Sheva has witnessed form prominent themes in Lapid's novels. The crimes that take place in the Badihi series are first and foremost economic in nature. As the series progresses, the themes become increasingly local(ized). In the first, Judge Hornshtik kills his wife in order to prevent her divorcing him and taking all their money (this, it transpires, being the original grounds for the marriage). This act could have happened anywhere, only by chance taking place in Omer, a satellite city of Be'er-Sheva with a high socioeconomic status. In the latest volume, however, the murder, which also takes place in Omer, is due to the embezzlement of bank clients in order to gain funds to invest in the new building project in and around Be'er-Sheva – "Ir Habahadim" (City of Training Bases). Slowly but surely, economic factors thus take on a local hue.

The economic changes are also illustrated in the depiction of Lizzie's uncles' shop. At the beginning of the series, this appears to be located in the old commercial center of the town close to the central bus station. As the volumes progress,

however, its site deteriorates, in the latest Lizzie seeking to convince her uncles to accept an offer for a new shop in the new central station:

'You should accept Zizyashvili's offer and close the shop,' said Lizzie. 'I've spoken with him. In the new station there are going to be escalators and modern lighting and everything will be new and beautiful and you'll get a shop for your shop. If you stay in the old station the police will remove you eventually. And anyhow, you don't have any customers there now.' (*End of the Lemon Season*, 117–118)

Although Lizzie is aware that the changes will take time, she also understands that progress cannot be stopped and should thus be embraced. Her aunt recognizes this as well and observes: "... It's for the development of Be'er-Sheva, Yaakov. You were always in favor of Be'er-Sheva developing. Sometimes a little bird can help a hippo. That's our part, Yaakov—to be the little bird in the hippo's ear" (*ibid*, 118). While economic development starts with individuals, however, major projects also frequently come at the expenses of small businesses. Thus, for example, Sargon, the factory in which Lizzie's mother works, is closed in order to make room for a new "free industrial zone":

The development of a free industrial zone was the most important economic revolution in Be'er-Sheva since Stef Wertheimer established his industrial park. F.I.Z (Free Industrial Zone) was the incarnation of the vision of a new Middle East. (*Sand in Your Eyes*, 21–22)

Here we see how Israeli socioeconomics are beginning to move away from a socialist focus on "small workers" toward a capitalistic world in which the workers no longer matter, the prosperous land owners opting for projects designed to promote the city's long-term prosperity.

The Landscape of Be'er-Sheva in the Novels

In a television interview after the publication of the latest volume in the series, Lapid spoke about her reasons for locating them in Be'er-Sheva:

I chose Be'er-Sheva because I didn't want to create it in Tel Aviv. First of all, because the center's not very interesting. I think it's boring. ... Because she [Lizzie] is a journalist, and the center of journalism is in Tel Aviv, the media center is in Tel Aviv, I didn't want to 'plant' her in this milieu so as to gain another perspective on the center as well, not only the periphery. She doesn't just come from the periphery, she also gives us another way of looking at the center. So it served a lot of purposes, Be'er-Sheva. (Lapid 2007)

Lapid depicts Be'er-Sheva in realistic colors. Lizzie's job allows her to walk its streets, absorbing their flavor, in a literary illustration of Benjamin's journalist *flâneur*. The *flâneur* is also a detective, however:

Preformed in the figure of the *Flâneur*, is that of the detective. The *Flâneur* required a social legitimation of his habitus. It suited him very well to see his indolence presented as a plausible front, behind which, in reality, hides the riveted attention of an observer who will not let the unsuspecting malefactor out of his sight. (Benjamin 2002: 442)

However, Lizzie and Benjamin's *flâneur* also differs prominently with respect to the nature of the crimes they investigate. Those which Benjamin's *flâneur*-detective addresses generally occur in the metropolis, through which he wanders incognito (Salzani 2007: 171). In Be'er-Sheva, a medium-size city, however, Lizzie is well known and does not possess the *flâneur*'s anonymity.

While the murders that take place in the novels occur in and around Be'er-Sheva and are connected to its heart, they are rarely committed in the city itself. In three (*Local Press*; *Bait*; *End of the Lemon Season*), they transpire in Omer, one of its wealthy suburbs. In two, while in the city, they happen in isolated places – *Gesundheit*, a local pension that "stands in a big yard, fenced by a wall of palm trees that kept the city's racket and the toxic fumes of the cars passing on the highway at bay" (*The Gem*, 6), and Sarah's Valley, the old industrial zone (*Sand in Your Eyes*). In *Concubine on the Hill*, two of the murders take place in Be'er-Sheva (one of the Hasson brothers and the homeless Tuher Tuher) and two in other places – Dina Bamberg's in Tel Binyamin and Uzi Nedava's in Switzerland. With the exception of

the Swiss location, however, all the places described lie within Be'er-Sheva's environs, reflecting the local population of Bedouin, moshavniks, university professors, etc.

Significantly, both the first murder in the first book and that in the latest volume to date occur in Omer, one of several satellite settlements around Be'er-Sheva. During the 1960s and 1970s, much of the "older" Ashkenazi population moved from Be'er-Sheva to Omer, leaving the city inundated by a poorer population (Cohen 2006: 20). In the following two decades, Omer witnessed a further wave of rich non-Ashkenazi migration, particularly in what is known as Parsley Hill. This fact is reflected in Lapid's novels, the first murder taking place within the rich Ashkenazi elite in Omer, the last being that of Dahan, a Mizrahi murdered in his house in the settlement. Since many of this group have family and relatives in the established neighborhoods, no tension thus exists between the affluent and poor districts as is the case in other Israeli cities (Gradus and Bluestein-Livnon 2001: 8).

The principal subject in the final three novels is Be'er-Sheva's development, the murders that occur within them being intricately linked to the soil and landscape of the Negev. *Sand in Your Eyes* underscores the dryness of the region, the novel taking place during a huge sandstorm that, while typical of the area, was nonetheless unusual: "The weatherman who was interviewed on the radio said that such a storm hadn't visited the Negev for over 30 years" (5). The plot revolves around the development of the industrial area in Sarah's Valley. The land belongs to members of Tarshish family, some of whom are unwilling to sell, leading to the murder and its investigation. As the sandstorm fades and the sand piles are cleared, more and more family secrets are revealed, enabling Lizzie to solve the mystery. The quarrel over land and its use is thus associated with ancient family feuds.

In *Concubine on the Hill*, the dispute over land relates to the airport and tourist and trade center planned for Sedei Teyman. The book also takes place during the local mayoral elections, one of the nominees playing a major role in the plot. By this time, Lizzie is not only spending more

and more time in Tel Aviv with Roni but also goes with him to Switzerland. Here, the cultural comparison drawn between Be'er-Sheva and Tel Aviv in the previous books is replaced by an environmental and ecological comparison between Be'er-Sheva and Silvaplana – the dry Negev vs. the green, luscious Swiss town. The comparison between the two locations underscores Be'er-Sheva's centrality for Lizzie and the novel/series as a whole. While in the last book to date, *End of the Lemon Season*, the murder takes place in Omer, the plot once again revolves around construction projects in Be'er-Sheva and the Negev. The embezzlement that leads to the murder derives from Maurice Dahan's greed for money to invest in "Ir Habahadim," the straw breaking the camel's back being his attempt to "squeeze" Yocheved Kellerman for more funds to invest in the huge new military base.

In the last three books in the series, Be'er-Sheva and its environs thus become more central as the plot becomes increasingly local(ized). As Lizzie notes in the first book in relation to Judge Hornshtik: "And Hornshtik, well everybody knew that if Hornshtik wanted, he could have lived in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, and if his career stalled, it was simply because he chose—yes, chose—to live here" (*Local Press*, 8). Although Hornshtik chooses to live and work in the Negev area, he could have lived anywhere, the location being similarly random in *Bait* and in *The Gem*. As the series proceeds, local space becomes ever more central, the landscape and inhabitants assuming increasingly important roles – sand and soil in *Sand in Your Eyes*; hills and property and Jews and Bedouin, in *Concubine on the Hill*; and construction and development, the mayor, and prosperity of the Negev and its residents in *End of the Lemon Season*.

Conclusion

The city of Be'er-Sheva plays a major role in Lapid's Lizzie Badihi series. All the novels are set in the city and Negev region, Be'er-Sheva's status as the capital of the region on one hand

and its peripheral state on the other constituting prominent features of the plot. Be'er-Sheva thus represents Bhabha's third space that is neither center nor periphery, rebelling against its position in relation to the ruling center. Lapid's novels reflect the city's hybridity by contrasting it with Tel Aviv – the large, central metropolis that houses the headquarters of the paper for which Lizzie writes. The novels reflect Be'er-Sheva's eclectic and colorful populace – rich and poor, immigrants and veterans, Jews and Bedouin, and Ashkenazim and Mizrahim. The third space that intersects the center and periphery becomes more and more prominent as the series progresses. The changes the city witnesses – the regional development, cultural consolidation, and growth of independence – all contribute to its distinctiveness and evolution across the volumes. Be'er-Sheva thus embodies a vigorous, lively third space that increasingly establishes itself in distinction from the center.

While in the first three novels Be'er-Sheva and the Negev are incidental to the plot, the murders equally plausibly taking place elsewhere because of being tied to more global reasons (especially interfamilial financial disputes), in the later ones the location is central to the storyline. This circumstance reflects the sociocultural development Be'er-Sheva has undergone in recent years.

Thus, for example, Lapid presents the demographic changes that occurred in the city in the wake of the second wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, which completely altered its social fabric. While in the first three volumes the contrast lies between the Ashkenazi elite (Judge Hornshtik in *Local Press*, the Simon family in *Bait*, and the Levitt family in *The Gem*) and the simple Mizrahim symbolized by Lizzie's family, in the later ones this disappears, the antithesis between "goodies" and "baddies" becoming a function of socioeconomic status rather than origin. Rather than a local change, however, this also reflects the processes taking place in Israeli society as a whole as over the years it has become both more multicultural and capitalistic.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Arcade Project of Walter Benjamin](#)
- ▶ [Edward Said and New York](#)
- ▶ [Flaneur](#)
- ▶ [Walter Benjamin](#)
- ▶ [Walking the Crowd: Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudlaire, Walter Benjamin](#)

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