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## The Expression of Israeli Southern Periphery's Voices Through the Symbolism of Domestic versus Wild Animal

by *Ilanit Ben-Dor Derimian*

### Abstract

*This article focuses on the animal symbolism used for representing the local identity of the southern periphery in Israel. From an ecocritical point of view, the domestic and the wild animal images will be analyzed as expressions of different shades (domestication and wildness) in the category of Nature, on the Nature-Culture dichotomy. The anthropological research method of discourse analysis has been adapted here to review the domestic donkey's image in Sami Berdugo's novel, Donkey (2019), and the discourse on the wild ass's image in the media and especially by activists from the Negev. While the representation of the two types of animals raises awareness of the existential problems of southern periphery's inhabitants, it also exposures nuances in their social status and the local identity reconstruction process.*

### Introduction

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### Introduction

The entire southern part of the State of Israel, which extends over 60 percent of its territory, can be perceived as a peripheral area, whose inhabitants are often considered more transparent and neglected by state institutions, compared to the hegemonic privileged center.<sup>1</sup> Recently, however, groups and agents from the south have raised their voices and been heard. These voices manage to create fluctuations in the prevailing attitudes towards the south. Although the desert continues to represent the oriental wild Other in comparison to the occidental cultivated Self on the categorical dichotomy between nature and culture,<sup>2</sup> it

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<sup>1</sup> For a full overview of the development of the Negev's image and its representation in the context of center-periphery relations, see Ilanit Ben-Dor Derimian, *From the Conquest of the Desert to Sustainable Development: The Representation of the Negev in Public Discourse in Israel* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> According to the structuralist anthropological approach, binary thinking is at the base of human thought, and it is through this form of thinking that man defines his world in binary categories, see Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New-York: Basic Books, 2008 [1963]). The contrast to which the study refers, between "Culture" and "Nature," is part of the hierarchical dichotomies revealed by the postcolonial approach, as an expression of one primary dichotomy: The Occidental-Western "Self" versus the Oriental "Other," see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1978]).

gained an appreciated authentic Hebrew-ecological-image. That image competes with the forsaken image from the past of development towns and unrecognized Bedouin settlements. This shift in image is to be found mainly in southern areas of desert tourism that are remote and far from urban centers: for instance, around the town of Mitzpe Ramon, on the edge of the Ramon crater.<sup>3</sup> Yet it has also affected other southern localities' images, through the rise of cultural activity and the search for an authentic voice.<sup>4</sup> The question is how are these shifts in images expressed in the current public and literary discourse? How does the use of animal symbolism represent these shifted images? In previous studies, from an ecocritical approach, we followed the changes in the representation of the desert as the Other due to political changes and the penetration of ecological ideas. In this study, we will examine the representation of the nuances in the current perception of this otherness between different regions in the south, which cannot be generalized to include all its communities under one definition. Loyal to the ecocritical point of view, we chose to discuss, through anthropological discourse analysis, the domestic donkey and the wild ass representations in Israeli literature and media from the south. The reference to literature as an arena of social discourse stems from the perception of literary texts as influenced by the construction of social reality and at the same time as a source of influence on social construction.<sup>5</sup> The animal figures will be analyzed in the context of the sub-division, through social construction, into human and animal categories, within the dichotomy of Nature versus Culture.

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<sup>3</sup> For further details, see chapter 7 on Mitzpe Ramon in Ben-Dor Derimian, *From the Conquest of the Desert*, 160-190.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in Beer Sheva, Sderot, Dimona, and Yeruham (Ibid., 128-159).

<sup>5</sup> In accordance with the principles of sociocriticism which emphasizes the social context in which the text was written. Claude Duchet, ed., *Sociocritique* (Paris: Nathan, 1979); Ruth Amossy, "Sociocritique et argumentation: L'exemple du discours sur le 'déracinement culturel' dans la nouvelle droite," in *La politique du texte: enjeux sociocritiques. Pour Claude Duchet*, eds. Jacques Neefs and Marie-Claire Ropars (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1992), 29-50.

## Categorical Perception of Man and Animal in the Dichotomy of Nature versus Culture

Various scholars have already referred to the dichotomy between nature and culture, which began with the development of Western culture in Ancient Greece, when “nature has been defined by way of contrast with or opposition to an antonym.”<sup>6</sup> A paradoxical duality in this categorical division is perceived.<sup>7</sup> Although everything that is man-made is unnatural, man himself is a product of nature. That is, the category of Nature, on the one hand, contains man and on the other hand places man outside it, as one who observes nature and makes use of it.<sup>8</sup> The animal, too, for all its being a real physical entity, is a categorical construction of human ideas and concepts. It is perceived by man in his mind. Man is the one who defines and represents it, and in such a representation it constitutes a mirror image of himself.<sup>9</sup> In the same context, the art critic, John Berger,<sup>10</sup> traces the meaning of the fascination and nostalgia that underlies the relationship between modern man and the animal world. He observes the modern process of drifting away from nature: a cultural and physical process in which once ago “animals interceded between man and their origin because they were both like and unlike man,”<sup>11</sup> but have since then been completely pushed to the existential fringes of modern man and are disappearing from his life. Despite all this, however, Berger claims that it is not so easy to erase animals from the human imagination: “Sayings, dreams, games, stories, superstitions, the language itself, recall them [...]. The images are of animals *receding* into a wildness that existed only in the

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Rosen, “Remarks on Human Nature in Plato,” in *Philosophies of Nature: The Human Dimension*, eds. Robert S. Cohen and Alfred I. Tauber (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 151-162, 151.

<sup>7</sup> This paradoxical duality in the Man-Animal’s categorical division was also mentioned by Noam Gal, “A Note on the Fictional Non-Human in Haviva Pedaya’s *The Eye of the Cat*,” *Mikan* 14 (2014): 395-417, 400-402.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Ingold, “Introduction,” in *What is an Animal?*, ed. Tim Ingold (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 1-16.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Marvin and Garry Mullan, *Zoo Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). See also: Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991) who claims that the animal serves as a mirror to the human structure, to maintain social norms.

<sup>10</sup> John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage International, 1980), 3-28.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

imagination.”<sup>12</sup> Within the space of imagination, in particular, man allows himself to play with the boundaries of this categorical division between culture and nature.

Beyond the fact that the categories at both ends of the dichotomy are not so distinct, in each category there are sub-categories. Mainly, we would like to address and analyze the sub-categories in animal representation, of the wild animal and the domesticated animal. The adjective “wild,” which originated in Ancient Greece, expresses everything outside the city, the Polis, the embodiment of the civilized world, the expression of man’s control over nature.<sup>13</sup> The “natural,” in this classical conception, is “wild” and therefore unpredictable and irregular, while man acts to regulate nature and adapt it to his needs. In the case of the animal, the adjustment is made through training and domestication. The perception of the “wild” as “more natural” gives the “wild” a higher degree of authenticity, since it is not subject to social norms, compared to the domesticated animal. At the same time, the wild Other evokes ambivalent feelings of desire and fear, such as the ones that have been awoken towards the Bedouins who were perceived as part of the Other, the wild nature of the desert. We suggest a possible interpretation of the choice to present different socially constructed sub-categories of animals, the “wild” ass and the “domesticated” donkey, in the social discourse from the south. Let us first look at Sami Berdugo’s literary work and his focus on the relationship between a man and a donkey.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15-17.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Scully, “The Nature of the Gods and Early Greek Poetic Thought,” in *Philosophies of Nature*, eds. Robert S. Cohen and Alfred I. Tauber (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1998), 163-176.

## Relationships between Man and Donkey in Sami Berdugo's Novel<sup>14</sup>

### *The Donkey's Figure and the Israeli Society*

The donkey figure appears in numerous literary works in world literature. Shavit and Reinhartz<sup>15</sup> explain in the introduction of their book their choice to dedicate a whole volume to the donkey's character in culture. They claim that unlike other personified animals in writings throughout history, the donkey's representation is not one-dimensional, but has several traits and represents the antinomies and strata in human existence. Among these antinomies the cultural researchers include, on the one hand, characters as sublime, revered, wise, strong, and good-hearted; and on the other hand, vicious, wicked, stupid, humble, and harmful.

The pursuit of the history of the donkey representation in Jewish sources and Hebrew literature reveals changes in Hebrew-Israeli society. The donkey appears numerous times in the Bible, mainly as a beast carrying a burden (Genesis 45: 23), but it has also been used by women to ride on (Joshua 15:18). It symbolizes wealth and honor, as in the case of Abraham (Genesis 12:16). Even the name "donkey" (*hamor* [חָמֹר]) in Hebrew stems from the same root (ח.מ.ר) as the word "matter" (*homer* [חֹמֶר]) and symbolizes materiality. But riding a donkey is also considered a sign of humility, which is why the Messiah is also described as poor and riding a donkey (Zechariah 9: 9).

With the beginning of the Zionist enterprise in *Eretz Isra'el*, the Jewish pioneers adopted the native Bedouin's agricultural heritage, as well as the use of the donkey within it. The donkey figure had turned into an iconic animal of the Jewish agricultural settlement, rooted in the land of Israel. Thus, it is not surprising that the donkey appears in many literary works for children since the beginning of the twentieth century. The ideology behind this symbolic act is expressed in a later children's story (from 1966) by Leah Goldberg (1911-1970), *The Desert*

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<sup>14</sup> Sami Berdugo, *Hamor (Donkey)* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Yaacov Shavit and Jehuda Reinhartz, *Hamoriyut – Massa' be-'iqvot ha-hamor – mitologiyah, 'allegoriyah, mitos we-cliché (The Donkey: A Cultural History: A Journey Through Myth, Allegory, Symbol and Cliché)* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2014).

*Adventure*.<sup>16</sup> In this story, some children of Kibbutz Revivim in the Negev join their father, the archaeologist, on a tour to the Nabataean city of Shivta. On the way, they see Bedouins with a white donkey. The children admire the donkey and ask their father to buy it for the kibbutz's petting zoo, and the father immediately agrees and buys the donkey. Symbolically, there is a link between the donkey and the native Bedouin, from whom the Jewish settlers want to learn how to become the lords of the desert, by appropriating the animals that connect him to nature, whether it is the donkey or the camel. The Bedouin, in accordance with Zionist ideology, collaborates with these terms of trade and the power and dependency relations that follow. Other children's literary works formed an integral part of the cultural landscape of the pre-statehood period and were perceived as one of the characteristics of the new Zionist space. For example, in the story "The incarnations of Miri," by S. Yizhar (the pen name of Yizhar Smilansky, 1916-2006) published in the newspaper *Davar* for children in 1947, the description of the connection between Miri, the female donkey, and the society surrounding it, is used to point out the social changes in Eretz Isra'el society as a result of modernization and distancing from nature. These changes include the perception of Israeli society as being torn apart between East and West; tradition and modernity; and nativity and exile, in association with ideological tenets about agricultural work and the relations with the neighboring Arab society.<sup>17</sup>

The representation of the donkey figure allows us also to learn about hierarchical relations in society. A particularly representative case appears in the book *People in the Desert*.<sup>18</sup> Bedouin society is presented as a stereotypical and patriarchal one where the man rides the camel "as befits a strong man," while the woman, in an inferior position, rides the donkey "as befits a modest woman." The hierarchical division also appears in Nathan Alterman's poem from 1947, "*Miryam Bat Nissim*," which describes a large Yemeni family. This poem also points out the gender division and power relations between humans and animals, in situations

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<sup>16</sup> Leah Goldberg, *Harpatqah ba-midbar (The Desert Adventure)* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1966). This book was published first in Sweden in 1964 under the name "Eli lives in Israel," with photographs by Anna Rivkin, who visited Kibbutz Revivim in 1964.

<sup>17</sup> See this story on the Ben-Yehuda Project website, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://benyehuda.org/read/23842>.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Ben Israel, *'Anashim ba-midbar (People in the Desert)*, photographs by Ervin Farkash (Tel Aviv: Amihai, 1962).

where the family moves from place to place, and they leave in a hierarchical order. The daughter Miriam, who is the speaker in the poem, is the last to march after the rest of the family. The caravan is sealed by the little donkey Bil'am. Once more, the connection is revealed between the low status of women in the gender context and the donkey, as it represents the animal category at the margin of the hierarchical order.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Focus on Marginality and Social Critique in Sami Berdugo's Literary Work*

In recent years, there has been a growing tendency to focus on animal figures in Hebrew literature, particularly in literature written from the periphery or about the periphery in the context of the marginality and transparency of life there.<sup>20</sup> The historical representations of the donkey in the Eretz Israeli social hierarchy can explain Sami Berdugo's choice to give this animal a central place in his novel, *Donkey* (2019), in the context of representing the periphery. The author presents the donkey as a submissive, sickly, and miserable animal, without any affinity with the ethos attributed to it, connected to wealth or the appearance of the Messiah. The donkey in the novel apparently suffers from the trauma of his past abuse and is in the process of dying. The human protagonist himself lives his life in neglect and in a marginalized existence in the periphery and is desperate after his unsuccessful empathetic attempts to save the donkey.

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<sup>19</sup> For further reading on the analysis of the donkey figure in Hebrew literary children's works, see: Uri Rozenberg, "Ha-hamor shel Leah Goldberg" ("Leah Goldberg's Donkey"), *Noshanot*, last modified December 1, 2021, <https://prozza.com/tag/אריה-נבון/>.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the first prose book of Haviva Pedaya (born in 1957), *Be-'eyn ha-hatul* (*The Eye of the Cat*) (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 2008). We have referred to this literary work in other writings (see: Ben-Dor Derimian, *From the Conquest of the Desert*, 244-246) and it has received widespread attention from other researchers regarding raising awareness of the relationship between man and the environment in general and the southern and marginal periphery in particular. See Noam Gal, "A Note on the Fictional Non-Human in Haviva Pedaya's *The Eye of the Cat*," *Mikan* 14 (2014): 395-417. In Pedaya's book, stray cats serve as a metaphor for marginalized people in the south of the country.

Berdugo explains in an interview with the literary critic Yoni Livne<sup>21</sup> that his writing stems from the need to tell the story of people like him, because until he started writing he felt he had not found a character or voice in Israeli literature somewhat similar to his own: “I have not encountered stories that tell anything about my world, which can be called a peripheral world, or an Oriental world, or a world of immigrants.”<sup>22</sup>

Berdugo is defined as a demanding writer, who asks his readers to strive and delve deeper into the layers of his literary work. The author has won the Brenner Prize and the Sapir Prize for Hebrew Literature of 2020 for writing this novel. The Sapir Prize Judging Committee stated some of its motivations:

In a virtuosic and resolutely original language, with wisdom and courage, Sami Berdugo’s *Donkey* sheds light on corners of abandonment and neglect in a way that has not been done before. [...] yet its characters remain in their foreignness and thus also maintain their independence. Writing that is pure being – moment by moment, alive and sharp.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, Berdugo is known for inventing a unique writing style that also touches the margins while producing expressions and using sub-standard language that is consciously and intentionally mixed with high-standard language.

On the back cover of the novel, Berdugo’s writing is compared to that of renowned Israeli writers, including S. Yizhar. Surely, it is impossible not to find a resemblance between Yizhar’s literary works about the south<sup>24</sup> and this novel, both of which are influenced by *the Stream of Consciousness* writing style, while describing in great detail both the thoughts of their protagonists and the southern desert

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<sup>21</sup> Yoni Livne, “Re’ayon ’im Sami Berdugo, Hamor” (“An interview with Sami Berdugo, *Donkey*”), *Mitat Sdom*, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://bedofsodom.wordpress.com/2019/12/10/ראיון-עם-סמי-ברדוגו-המור/>.

<sup>22</sup> Berdugo was born in 1970 to Moroccan parents. He grew up with his three brothers in Mazkeret Batya. He lost his father at the age of 13. He has so far published 9 literary works, between the years 1999 - 2019, for which he has won prestigious awards, such as the Levy Eshkol Literary Work Prize for the year 2006.

<sup>23</sup> “Sapir Prize for Literature,” News, *la fleur’s*, last modified February 4, 2021, <https://lafleurs.com/news/2021/02/04/mifal-hapais-celebrates-20th-anniversary-of-the-sapir-prize-for-literature/>.

<sup>24</sup> For example: S. Yizhar, *Yeme Tziqlag (Days of Ziklag)* (Tel-Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1989 [1958]).

landscape. In a second interview with Yoni Livne, Berdugo explains the choice to use this unique style:

The introverted stories I tell, the use of the stream of consciousness and their wallowing language - are the product of my critical position as a writer. [...]. In the last decade, I have realized that I want to say my opinion concerning place and time, questions of identity, and cultural-linguistic aspects. Probably my way of demonstrating criticism is to create protagonists who have something distorted about them, as though they are the product of a defective place. They carry in their bodies the wounds of this space.<sup>25</sup>

In another interview on the occasion of the publication of his book with the poet Sarai Shavit, on the literary TV program *Shovrim Shurah*, of November 14, 2019, Berdugo refers to the social criticism of Israeli society that emerges from the novel. He claims that the protagonist decides to retire from all Israeli systems of life—social, political, economic, human, cultural, and historical, because he, as a writer, may be tired of them. Berdugo explains that one of the tragic characteristics of Ruslan, the book's protagonist, is that he seeks to shake off any category and at the same time also strives to be defined. Berdugo testifies that “in Ruslan's relationship with the donkey, there is an attempt to reach some state of correction or peace, to find the good in the very basic aspects of life.”<sup>26</sup> We will follow the description of the relationship's evolution alongside Ruslan's developing ambition to express an authentic correct voice.

### *Description of the Plot and Ruslan's Connection to the Donkey*

Ruslan Isakov, around 50 years old, born in Azerbaijan, has recently resigned from his job as a building engineer at the local planning and construction committee in

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<sup>25</sup> Yoni Livne, “Re'ayon 'im Sami Berdugo be-'iqvot ha-zkhiyah ba-pras” (“An Interview with Sami Berdugo after Winning the Prize”), *Mitat Sdom*, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://bedofsodom.wordpress.com/2021/03/05/-הזכייה-בעקבות-ברדוגו-במית-סדום-ראיון-עם-סמי-ברדוגו-בעקבות-הזכייה-בפרס>

<sup>26</sup> The quotation is taken from the recording of the interview with Sarai Shavit, on the literary TV program *Shovrim Shurah*, of November 14, 2019.

Ashkelon and lives in isolation in a peripheral small locality, Bat-Hadar, near Ashkelon. There, in the neglected backyard of the modest housing unit he rents, he hides a donkey, which has been entrusted to him by the police, apparently after being abused by a delinquent teenager from the neighborhood, and it is not clear to whom it belongs. The book's plot unfolds over eight days in June 2018, a few weeks from the moment of Ruslan's encounter with the donkey, as a result of which Ruslan devotes himself to its care until it dies.

Throughout the book, the beast does not get a name and is called "donkey" (*hamor*) without a definite article. This naming according to the species category strengthens the donkey's anonymity, similar to that of Ruslan, the transparent protagonist. By avoiding giving the donkey a name with symbolic connotations, the author strives to present the materiality of the donkey's simple life, "the habit of a donkey. Simply a donkey."<sup>27</sup> In the interview with Yoni Livne, Berdugo explains the choice of the donkey, because the donkey, for him, "with all the catastrophes, the diseases, and the persecution, is an expression of the desire to return to matter,<sup>28</sup> to humanity, in the simplest sense of the word."<sup>29</sup> The novel's protagonist is drawn to this quality: "Perhaps because it is perceived by him as someone who knows nothing about his place and destiny [...], disciplined [...], this whole sight [...] has captured Ruslan."<sup>30</sup>

The description of Ruslan's encounter with the police, during the first meeting with the donkey, illustrates his identification with the animal, while Ruslan notices the resemblance between them when he looks "at donkey's fixés black eyes, that seemed opaque," and he interoperates in this gaze "that surrender by consent of Donkey, following which he also recognized his own submission in face of the police."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 15. All quotes from the novel have been translated by the author of this article (the novel has not yet been translated into other languages).

<sup>28</sup> As mentioned above, the name "donkey" in Hebrew stems from the same root as the word "material."

<sup>29</sup> Livne, "Re'ayon 'im Sami Berdugo, *Hamor*."

<sup>30</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

This is a silent and languageless fateful partnership, presented in the exchange of glances between the two characters, between the man and the animal.<sup>32</sup> In this context, John Berger writes that an animal “does not reserve a special look for man. But [...] man becomes aware of himself returning the look.”<sup>33</sup> Berger attaches special importance to the gaze of the animal, which is similar to the gaze of man and, at the same time, also completely separate from it. Indeed, in this novel, it appears that several times Ruslan tries to make eye contact with Donkey and fails to do so since Donkey’s gaze is directed towards the ground<sup>34</sup> or his eyes are opaque.<sup>35</sup> Ruslan also assumes that Donkey “does not see too much, [...] because how does a donkey see? How does it perceive colors and shapes? Who knows?”<sup>36</sup> Towards the end of the novel, however, active eye contact is described and even Ruslan felt that Donkey speaks to him through the gaze.<sup>37</sup>

To the process of identifying the animal gaze as familiar, as Berger described it, it is worth adding the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s<sup>38</sup> distinction between the look and the gaze. According to Lacan, in the moment of looking there is a fixation and pause, for no reason, on any object, and only then does the subject’s identification with the thing he sees takes place. The moment of gaze, on the other hand, is the moment when the subject sees his gaze returning to him from the object of his observation. The gaze returns to the observer, or, in other words, the subject is reflected in what he has chosen to observe.<sup>39</sup> This reflexivity, the return of the gaze, takes place because the subject sees in the object something of himself.

Throughout the novel, Berdugo expresses the human protagonist’s identification with the donkey while observing it, at the same time transparent, detached, and indifferent. The protagonist’s sense of marginalization is also expressed across the novel. At the beginning of the novel, the reader becomes aware of Ruslan’s

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<sup>32</sup> Emphasis on the exchange of glances between Ruslan and Donkey appears several times in the novel. See for example *ibid.*, 15 and 167.

<sup>33</sup> Berger, *About Looking*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar 6 of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1998 [1965]).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

preference for wandering the bypass road of the settlement in which he lives, walking idly on the marginal road. There he also feels “distant, and moreover - remote, and especially expelled, an outcast from life.”<sup>40</sup> However, social margins and existential detachment do not ultimately lead Ruslan to dissipate, following his sensation of the “evaporation of life from his body,”<sup>41</sup> described at the beginning of the novel. On the contrary, as the literary critic, Yosef Oren<sup>42</sup> claims, the novel exposes a very present, material, and physical existence, which increases during the evolution of the relationship between Ruslan and the donkey. Ruslan is involved in taking care of the donkey’s needs and becomes very active as a result—feeding and watering, cleaning and caring. The bad odors from Donkey’s body did not deter Ruslan from giving him treatment either, because, in the face of the donkey’s pile of fresh dung, Ruslan felt “upright in his life, living literally, with its proper purpose.”<sup>43</sup> That is, caring for the donkey and its basic needs, also revives Ruslan’s feeling of existence.

When one day, Steve, Ruslan’s lover, comes to visit him and finds him in the yard with the donkey, Steve says to Ruslan: “ ‘You are here’ “ and for Ruslan this statement expresses what Steve thinks, that “this is how he is: marginal.” Ruslan rebels against this perception, though, while thinking that in these words “Steve presents what is probably so incorrect in the backyard, neither ‘you’ nor ‘here’.” And he replies to Steve: “ ‘We are here’.”<sup>44</sup> Precisely in the neglected backyard, the feeling of shame due to the awareness that others probably dislike someone living in this squalor with a donkey and even having an erotic relationship with it, is replaced by a sense of pride from the very choice to live life in its simplicity.

Donkey, as if planted in Ruslan’s backyard, “so relaxed [...] integrates”<sup>45</sup> in an ongoing present, and serves as a model for Ruslan who also strives for a passive and peaceful present. But Ruslan doubts that he can reach this ideal existence. He contemplates: “And when will Ruslan be just a fact in his own eyes? For a long

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<sup>40</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Yosef Oren. “ ‘Hamor’ – Rom’an retzini u-mefukakh shel Sami Berdugo” (“*Donkey*- A Serious and Sober Novel by Sami Berdugo”), *News1*, last modified September 11, 2021, <https://m.news1.co.il/Archive/0026-D-150332-00.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 167.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 7.

time, he has been filling the days and leaving them incomplete for himself. And that's not what he wants."<sup>46</sup>

Ruslan is fascinated by Donkey's indifference to its subordinate existence. He thus finds a resemblance to the state of his life, when he too continues to maintain the routine of life without any purpose, without rebellions. His only rebellion is his choice to shed the rituals of what is considered normative life. He felt that, like Donkey, he had no fear of life, because he had shed from himself every desire and every sense of belonging while trying to live an individual and independent lifestyle. In this context, on the Israeli cultural television program *Sokhen Tarbut*, broadcasted on December 22, 2019, Berdugo describes Ruslan as someone who "decided to exempt himself from all normative lifestyles and laws. He cuts himself from work, from people, from the past, from history, from a place, and tries to maintain some kind of individual, autonomous lifestyle,"<sup>47</sup> which may give rise to a sense of self-alienation as well as detachment from the environment. But, as Berdugo concludes: "Along with the alienation, hatred or, I would say, the rejection he has towards the spirit of the time and place in the Israeli present, [...] I think he is trying to find some points to hold on to."<sup>48</sup>

### ***A Search for Authenticity and a Sense of Belonging through the Relationship between Human and Animal Description***

Seemingly, in the present time of the plot, almost nothing happens in the reality surrounding the protagonist and the writer dwells on detailed descriptions of the protagonist's daily Sisyphean experience and his inner world. On the other hand, the novel also reveals in stages a constitutive trauma from the past, which has led to the experience of the protagonist's current detached existence. Through this oscillation between past and present, the Israeli experience is revealed in all its shades: the landscapes, the identities of individuals and different groups in society (immigrants from the USSR, religious streams and Mizrahi-Ashkenazi divisions), different economic classes and center-periphery positions.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>47</sup> *Sokhen Tarbut*, broadcasted on December 22, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> From an interview with Berdugo on the Israeli cultural television program *Sokhen Tarbut*, broadcasted on December 22, 2019.

Ruslan escapes the hopelessness of the northern periphery, namely Kiryat Yam, the most excluded neighborhood, as the narrator defines it,<sup>49</sup> where he grew up. Even after settling in the south, though, he still does not feel at home, and wonders “how long does it take for him to know in his feeling that the residential structure, which is now behind him, is permanent for him?”<sup>50</sup>.

However, as already mentioned, from the beginning of the novel we are exposed to a metamorphosis that Ruslan experiences following the encounter with Donkey, when its presence for five weeks in Ruslan’s yard evokes a certain optimism and vitality in Ruslan. He feels that “since Donkey entered the wild yard, every time Ruslan sees it, his independent freedom coalesces and becomes justified.”<sup>51</sup> Ruslan feels more at home in the housing unit precisely because of his attention to the “backyard of the deserted garden,”<sup>52</sup> where Donkey resides. The wild authenticity of the garden is enhanced by the very attention to it. There, Ruslan recognizes the value of freedom in the wild and quiet nature: “The wind blows silently and there is no disturbance and no hint of overturning, so that liberty also gets to spread further, [...] the yard is sealed on the right and left and also in front thanks to the fleshy bright green colored leaves, joyful leaves.”<sup>53</sup>

Through the connection with the donkey, Ruslan gains a re-connection to nature and authenticity, when he realizes that in his marginal housing unit’s backyard, “what is perceived and seen naturally as backward is for him a forward, a kind of forward.”<sup>54</sup> That is, the marginal wild backyard, which recalls the perception of the periphery as Israel’s backyard, becomes the center of the stage. It is a symbol of a simple and authentic presence. As a result, Ruslan feels the undermining of the definitions between the periphery and the center in the face of the universal material existence as it is:

Then the settlement of Bat Hadar [...] will disperse and evaporate from him, and further in the distance, Ashkelon too will disappear, and not out of contempt will these places be erased, but because Ruslan knows, for a

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

short time, who he is now in the presence of Donkey: he is a man alive, inside of life. Neither on the side of life nor above it, [...] and in his heart, it is said: I am therefore not alone in the world.<sup>55</sup>

The connection with Donkey seems to compensate for Ruslan's social loneliness and disgust with Israeli society. Indeed, his connection with the animal has therapeutic consequences. This therapeutic process happens almost against all odds, because the domesticated donkey is imprisoned in a small yard with a barren olive tree, which does not bear fruit. Moreover, the open spaces the protagonist reaches are the arid fields around the settlement, beyond which the presence of industrial civilization predominates. This ambivalent attitude, ranging from connecting to and moving away from authentic nature, gains more presence as the novel continues and the disease of Donkey progresses. Then, Ruslan feels helpless and is not sure whether he understands correctly how to treat the donkey. He feels the lack of communication between them, in their "mutual silence that could never be dispelled."<sup>56</sup> The feeling of disconnection that exists between him and nature is strengthened inside him. He recognizes his opaque attitude towards nature and of his own authenticity. Nevertheless, later on in the story, Ruslan feels strongly the existence of some communication between him and Donkey:

The black eyes [...] are now completely open, wide open beyond their capacity, and they are not indifferent, they now lack their usual opaque childlike innocence, and they say something. The staring gaze of Donkey mumbles, speaks, hell yeah speaks.<sup>57</sup>

Ruslan interprets the message he reads in Donkey's gaze. He recognizes "the statement [...], in which the essence is hidden: I live as I should live."<sup>58</sup> If so, despite the feeling that nature is imprisoned and regulated, Berdugo describes a process of awakening to life in the periphery, through the connection to natural authenticity, represented by human-animal relations.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

Moreover, the author outlines throughout the novel the concept of southernness, which is not necessarily the same thing as the peripheral south of Israel. Although Ruslan and Donkey live in the peripheral “southern south,”<sup>59</sup> this space reflects the Israeli existence in general as an “unlighted southern country,”<sup>60</sup> since:

After all, the nature that exaggeratedly dominates Ashkelon and its metastases in the southern district is in fact the character of the entire State of Israel and its annexations. Because where in this whole country is there a space where the sun does not reside - and reside there most of the hours of the day? Where is the sun really hidden and concealed so that the area should be called “Northern Israeli” or “Northern Palestinian”? There is no such thing; Here is a land-flooded entity of south. This is actually the place, this is its quality, which is not only geography.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, according to Berdugo’s approach, the peripheral otherness has already permeated all corners of the country and beyond. It is similar to a process of desertification. This approach relates to the Global South theory, which focuses on geopolitical power relations in an era of globalization. The theory is based on the notion of the “South” as an epistemological position, with the aim of undermining the “Northern,” i.e. European-American, hegemonic culture which claims to possess universal knowledge. Scholars in the social sciences have proposed instead the notion of knowledge of the South.<sup>62</sup> Southern knowledge, they argue, is knowledge created from the struggle of social groups that oppose centers of power and structures of global inequality. The global south approach looks for the particular knowledge of various communities, which are considered southern, not necessarily because of their position on the map—although the majority of these societies live in the Southern Hemisphere—but because of their

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>62</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Sciences*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South, or How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

economic and social dispossession from a position of power and knowledge in a globalized world.

In this context, this article joins the claims of Israeli social researchers regarding Israel as part of the Global South.<sup>63</sup> Berdugo, in a way, captured this idea of the possibility to identify Israel at some point as part of the Global South. In fact, Ruslan is described as someone who has recoiled from “a messy and slippery depletion” that “continues to plague the country, especially here, in the southern cities disguised as capitalists with great success.”<sup>64</sup> This description intensifies the perception of Israeli society as a southern entity, depleted by the processes of Americanization. Likewise, Shaul Setter, in his introduction to a volume of 2021 that connects the south of Israel to the Global South theory, also refers to the perception of the south in Berdugo’s novel: “It is not the ‘second’ (Southern) Israel versus the ‘first’ (Northern) Israel, because there is ‘no such thing’ as the latter. There is only Israel as South. Berdugo’s book poses a nonreactive, non-antagonistic South. Peripheral but expanding.”<sup>65</sup>

Following the Global South approach that undermines the hegemony of “northern” knowledge and emphasizes the importance of knowledge coming from the South, we find that Berdugo himself also offers in this novel an opportunity to think from the South, to listen to the peripheral southern authentic voices through the description of human-animal relations.

## **Representation in Public Discourse of the Wild Ass Rewilding in the Southern Open Spaces**

### ***The Project of Rewilding Animals in Israel - Ecology and Nationalism***

Voices from the periphery are expressed differently in the context of public discourse regarding the efforts made since the 1970s by the Israel Nature and Parks

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<sup>63</sup> See: Haviva Pedaya, “An essay about the South,” *Theory and Criticism* 54 (2021): 115-134; Erez Tzfadia and Oren Yiftachel, “Urban Displaceability: A Southeastern Perspective,” *Theory and Criticism* 54 (2021): 59-86.

<sup>64</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 16.

<sup>65</sup> Shaul Setter, “Preface: On the Way to Thinking from the South,” *Theory and Criticism* 54 (2021): 5-21, 6-7.

Authority (INPA)<sup>66</sup> to “return biblical animals” to their original natural habitats. It is considered part of a global effort to rewild animals. Indeed, since the 1970s, Israeli society has been influenced by international global processes, with the deterioration of the dominant Socialist Party’s status and the penetration of liberal principles. Since then, the global ecological movement has gained power, and also in Israel, the influence of the environmental discourse has increased. Still, the discourse on the rewilding of biblical animals can also be viewed from a national level, as part of the State of Israel’s efforts to legitimize the Jewish presence in this region of the Middle East, by strengthening the idea of the historical continuity of the Jewish people’s presence in the region from biblical times to the present day. It is clear, though, that for the INPA, the ecological-scientific argument is important, as explained on the Authority’s website, in a page dedicated to describing the international project, posted on March 3, 2022. It is stated that the goal of the project is to bring back to the area animals that have disappeared from the local landscape. As part of the project, several extinct species were brought from abroad and released to nature, including the oryx and the Persian fallow deer. In the present article, we will focus on the release of the *Asiatic wild ass* (*onager*) into the Negev region.

### *The Onager/ Asiatic Wild Ass - Myth and Public Discourse*

The Asiatic wild ass is also known as the onager (in Hebrew: *Pere'* [פּרָא']) and its scientific name is *Equus hemionus*.<sup>67</sup> The onager is indeed described in numerous verses in the Bible. In these descriptions, the image of a wild free animal is already emphasized, galloping in space with its enormous power and speed, unreachable for man and therefore impossible to restrain and tame. It is the complete opposite of the image of the domesticated donkey. In fact, the adjective which represents the notion of “wildness” is also named “*Pere'*.” Accordingly, the image of the onager in the Bible is used to describe situations of complete freedom and power. For example, the prophet Jeremiah describes the sinful people of Israel as the

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<sup>66</sup> The Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) was established by a government decision in 1964 with the aim of protecting nature and cultivating natural reserves in the country.

<sup>67</sup> “Asiatic wild ass,” *Britannica*, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/animal/Asiatic-wild-ass>.

onager, who obeys no authority and is eternally galloping after the lusts of its heart (Jeremiah 2: 24). This image has permeated Zionist and Israeli cultures. The onager which roams today in the open spaces of the Negev fits perfectly into the image of the wild landscapes of the desert, which are the symbol of complete freedom and biblical authenticity.

The narrative of recovering the biblical land is amplified by informational materials distributed by the INPA, which convey a sense of ‘pride’ because of the project’s success, with about 300 onagers currently roaming in the Negev. For example, in a film produced by the INPA that was released on its website on February 12, 2021, the project is presented solemnly and respectfully. Against the background of western music and photographs of desert animals in the Hai-Bar Yotvata wildlife reserve, the director of the reserve between 1982 and 1990 transmits the history of the project to several young INPA workers standing around him and listening attentively to him. The film reveals photos and historical archival videos of the release of the wild ass and its adaptation to the open space, which highlight the historical importance of the project.

Nevertheless, the onager that was released eventually in the Negev does not match exactly the subspecies described in the Bible, since this species has long since become extinct, mainly due to hunting activity.<sup>68</sup> Since the extinct Syrian subspecies could not be brought in, two related subspecies were imported to Israel from Iran and Europe in 1968: the Iranian and Turkestan wild asses. Through a process of hybridization, a new subspecies was created in the Hai-Bar wildlife reserve of Yotvata, which is the wild ass that was released into nature between 1982 and 1987. So, even the rewilded onager is not exactly “natural,” but was assembled by man through his scientific and technological capabilities. These onagers are larger than those who lived in the Negev before. Scientists estimate that as a result, they do not have natural predators in the area, as they had in the past, and so they reproduce in an uncontrolled manner.<sup>69</sup> This fact leads us to discuss the current

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<sup>68</sup> The Syrian wild ass became extinct in the area in the 1930s. It is the subspecies that fits all the characteristics described in the verses of the Bible. See: Zohar Amar, “Pere’ ve-hamor vu-mah she-beinehem” (“Onager and Donkey – and how to Distinguish between them”), *Leshonenu* 76 (2014): 265-283.

<sup>69</sup> According to the ecologist Shirley Bar-David, in her lecture at The Negev Highland LTSER platform conference (Mitzpe Ramon, October 28, 2021), where she referred to the issue of the wild ass restoration .

public discourse about the wild ass in the Negev, where on the one hand, there is admiration for the success of the project, and on the other hand fear of the consequences of the animals' uncontrolled number currently roaming free in the region.

For scientists and INPA personnel, the onager rewilding operation has been a huge success. After several decades, it is evident that their presence has had a positive effect on the ecosystem in which they live.<sup>70</sup> The discourse that supports species restoration is also reflected in the press, where articles are praising this phenomenon. For example, in an article written by Erez Erlichman, published in the *y-net* online newspaper on May 30, 2009, the headline already heralds the national ideology: "Returning to the ancient sources" (in Hebrew: "*Hozrim la-meqorot*").<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, some articles publish the failed results of these restoration operations. For example, in an article published on December 5, 2007, on the *y-net* website, the same journalist, Erez Erlichman, announces in the title that "In less than a week, 12 rewilded Persian fallow deer died" (in Hebrew: "*Tokh pahot mi-shavua' metu 12 yahmorim she-shuhreru la-teva*"") after their return to nature several months earlier. This type of article is consistent with the criticism of the phenomenon by various international bodies, including ecological ones, on the grounds that it is precisely such an intervention in nature that can cause more harm than good. Some scientists warn that there is not enough information about the consequences and fear the possibility of conflicts between humans and animals, especially when it comes to predators released into nature.<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, farmers in the Negev region see the successful results of this project as a serious problem for the region. They do admire the successful way in which the wild ass was absorbed in the open spaces of the Negev and enjoy the authentic sensation it evokes, and that fact that it promotes their desert tourism enterprises.

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<sup>70</sup> This opinion was expressed by both Zehava Sigal from the INPA and the ecologist Shirley Bar-David at the same conference on the subject (see the footnote above).

<sup>71</sup> See other articles, such as: Noa Haslovizer, "Teivat Noah ha-modernit: mi-sakanat hakhadah le-hashavah la-teva'" ("The modern Noah's Ark: From endangered to return into nature"), *y-Net*, March 22, 2018. Accessed June 22, 2023, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5182107,00.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Tzafir Rinat, "Ha-hayot she-ha-teva' lo' noten la-hen hizdamnut shniyah" ("The animals nature does not give a second chance"), *Haaretz*, March 11, 2016.

However, they complain that the onagers are destroying their property and crops, and they fear that the problem will get worse due to the rapid pace of their proliferation. These claims by the farmers are emphasized in the media<sup>73</sup> and are raising public awareness of the issue.

In the public discussion that arose about how to deal with the phenomenon of the onager's proliferation, various factors and bodies in Israeli society are involved, such as the farmers, the Bedouins, the other residents, the scientists, and the state institutions. Through this discussion on the human-animal relationship, which we already started to present in this sub-chapter, it is possible to examine the voices of different social bodies involved in the process of reconstructing the local identity of the area.

### ***Local Identity Reconstruction through Public Discourse on the Wild Ass Presence in the Area of Mitzpe Ramon***

In our previous studies, we have referred to the concept of a continuously reconstructed "spatial local identity," a term coined by the Finnish geographer Anssi Paasi.<sup>74</sup> Beyond the identity of a specific territory, which is defined through educational systems and cultural institutions, lies the inhabitants' regional identity, the "regional consciousness," which refers to the identities given to the region within civil society, through the regional activism of social agents. It is also possible in the context of environmental struggles to address the issue from an ecological direction through a parallel concept, that of the "socio-environmental imagination,"<sup>75</sup> which is the attempt by social groups to design a space as a healthy

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<sup>73</sup> See: Roi Chiki Arad, "Ha'im ha-pra'im she-Hu'alu le-Isra'el me-Iran hem tiqvot har ha-Negev o ason eqologi" ("Are the onagers brought to Israel from Iran the hopes of the Negev or an ecological disaster?"), *Haaretz* December 20, 2017; Erez Erlichman, "Pere' ve-Adam: Ha'im ha-haqla'im ve-ha-pra'im yatzlihu lihyot yahad?" ("Wild and Human: will the farmers and the onagers manage to live together?"), *y-Net*, March 7, 2019. Accessed June 22, 2023, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5473121,00.html>; Shahar Rezkin, "Ha-pra'im ba'im" ("The onagers come"), *Kenes-Media*, April 28, 2021. Accessed June 22, 2023, <https://kenes-media.com/קו-למושב/פרא-המור-בר/>.

<sup>74</sup> Anssi Paasi, "Europe as a Social Process and Discourse: Considerations of Place, Boundaries and Identity," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 8, no. 1 (2001): 7-28.

<sup>75</sup> Diana K. Davis, *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011).

environment with positive and normative values. Thus, the onagers can also be perceived not only as the subject of scientific research but as part of the political ecology of the region and the socio-environmental imagination.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, as described in our previous studies,<sup>77</sup> with the establishment of the state, the construction of local identity relied on the socio-environmental imagination of the region following the anthropocentric Zionist project of the ‘conquest of the wilderness.’ In the 1970s, though, with the penetration of environmental ideas, as was described before, the socio-environmental imagination began to change in the direction of landscape conservation and the return of animal species to nature. New migrants came to Mitzpe Ramon from the privileged Center, with an agenda of seeking to return to nature and establishing ecological ventures, after winning tenders for the creation of agricultural and tourist farms. They contributed to a change in the construction of the local identity, to the point that today Mitzpe Ramon is defined as ‘the desert eco-tourism capital of the Negev.’ In this paper, we claim that the discourse on the process of rewilding the wild ass is also part of the power relations to gain legitimacy in the region, which redefine or reinforce the local identity.

A television reportage by Yigal Mosko, “Onager, man” (in Hebrew: “*Pere’ adam*”), on *Channel 12*, which was broadcast on August 30, 2019,<sup>78</sup> discussed the project of returning the wild ass to the Negev desert. First, the reporter quoted the well-known biblical verse in which the onager appears, in the book of Job (39: 5): “Who hath sent out the wild ass free?”<sup>79</sup> The rhetorical question conveys God’s pride in this wild beast he created. Next, farmers told stories of trying to stop the onager from entering the agricultural lands, but without success, because of their great strength. One of the farmers told of his first encounter with an onager, how he tried to send it away using a broomstick, and how the onager simply broke it. Another farmer explained that he tried installing all possible types of fences, including an electric one, but no fence could stop the onagers. The farmers also

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<sup>76</sup> The political ecologist, Miri Lavi-Neeman, referred to these aspects in her lecture at a conference of the Arava Institute, held in Mitzpe Ramon on October 28, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Ben-Dor Derimian, *From the Conquest of the Desert to Sustainable Development*.

<sup>78</sup> See the reportage on the *Mako* website, accessed June 22, 2023, [https://www.mako.co.il/news-channel2/Friday-News-cast-2019\\_q3/Article-a3ce72e2253ec61026.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/news-channel2/Friday-News-cast-2019_q3/Article-a3ce72e2253ec61026.htm).

<sup>79</sup> “Job 39:5, King James Version,” *Bible Gateway*, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job%2039%3A5&version=KJV>.

pointed out the danger of the encounters with these animals on the roads. In an article published on April 2021 in the newsletter of the kibbutzim and moshavim portal,<sup>80</sup> the reporter quotes one of these farmers, who complains about car accidents that caused serious damage to both humans and animals. He recounts his personal experience and emphasizes the helplessness he felt as a result of this inevitable encounter with this wild and fast beast.

Still, despite the damage this animal has inflicted on farmers, they marvel at its strength and might. Overall, although it causes economic damage to the farmland, it encourages tourism to the area through the reinforcement of the authentic wildlife area's ethos, which brands the area as a unique place for desert tourism.

Yigal Mosko's television's reportage of, "Onager, man," intensifies the image of a wild area while comparing it to the nature reserves of Africa. The reporter invites the public to take advantage of the comfortable access to this national 'safari,' within a driving distance from home, as the title of the reportage states: "This is not Africa, this is here in the Negev" (in Hebrew: "*Zeh lo' Afriqah, zeh ka'n ba-Negev*"). At the same time, the reportage pretty quickly moves to show the complaints of the farmers and those of the Bedouins. In this respect, human-animal relations create a possibility of cooperation between different social groups to establish a local identity that will suit different groups of inhabitants. This is so because, alongside this frame story of rewilding animals, images and representations of the region emerge, and with them the attempt to influence its identity and the perception of who belongs there. Since the region is identified with the Nature category, within the dichotomy between Nature and Culture, the debate is ultimately related to human categorical thinking that following contemporary ideologies establishes what is included in the category of Nature ("wild") in this region and what is excluded ("domestic"). In fact, the discourse around the rewilding of the wild ass also contributes to the recategorization of populations perceived as strongly related to nature, such as the farmers who cultivate the land and the traditional nomadic Bedouins. In the latter's case, their agricultural activity is considered by the INPA as interfering with the natural ecosystem's stability. Thus, they are shifted towards the domestic category, while their legitimacy to influence decisions related to the Nature category is reduced.

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<sup>80</sup> Rezkin, "The Onagers Come."

It is interesting to mention INPA's position on farmers in the area, as reported by Roi Chiki Arad in his article published in *Haaretz* in December 2017.<sup>81</sup> This position is presented by Dr. Assaf Tzoar, the ecologist of the Southern District, who claims: "There is very little vegetation in the desert, and on the opposite, agriculture runs lots of water into the area, which becomes very green. Naturally, it will attract wildlife. The availability of food increases the number of animals, so more animals cause more harm."<sup>82</sup>

By using this discourse, the INPA ecologist seems to place some of the blame for the uncontrolled reproduction of the onagers on the farmers who are violating the natural ecological balance. Nevertheless, he also claims that "we work with the farmers" to find a solution to minimize the damage. At the same time, it is harder to find solutions for Bedouin farmers. The redefinition of the region's identity based on the onager as the ultimate animal symbol reflects the political struggle between the Bedouins and the institutions of the state. For the state's institutions, the project of rewilding biblical animals is the perfect expression of the historical continuum of the ongoing Jewish presence in the area from the heroic period of the mythical biblical times. This expansion of the heroic biblical period is enhanced by the wild, powerful, liberated symbolism of the onager, which humans have failed to domesticate and subdue.

The policy of bringing biblical animals back into the landscape changes it, and at the same time connects Jews to their homeland and outlaws the practices of the Bedouins and the animals they own.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the camel, the animal most identified with Bedouin culture and with wanderings in the desert, is not defined as a local animal by the INPA members. On the contrary, it is tagged as a domestic animal that was artificially imported into the Negev desert by the Arab population and harms the region's ecosystem.<sup>84</sup> In this struggle, one can see a symbolic attempt by the authorities to downplay the Bedouin's share in the local identity and even exclude them from such an identity, by also strengthening the image of

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<sup>81</sup> Arad, "Ha'im ha-pra'im".

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Irus Braverman, "Wild Legalities: Animals and Settler Colonialism in Palestine/Israel," *PoLAR* 44, no. 1 (2021): 7-27.

<sup>84</sup> Adalah's News, "Adalah Demands Israel end its Discrimination against Bedouin and Camel Herders," *Adalah* (The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel) website, last modified June 14, 2020, <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/10034>.

the Bedouins as law violators. This approach is reflected in the reportage of Yigal Mosko,<sup>85</sup> that addresses this perception and the fact that the Bedouins were recently fined for keeping camels in the Negev. The Bedouin's representative in the reportage, who owns a tourist campsite in the region, resents this and claims that the Bedouin himself is part of nature and that the authorities have forgotten that. He accuses the authorities of not taking care of the proper balance of nature and not bringing alongside the onagers a predator that could prey on it and dilute its spread. By using this discourse, it seems that he is trying to elevate back the status of the Bedouins to people who are closer to nature and know better how to maintain the ecological balance there. The shared opposition of Jewish and Bedouin farmers to the uncontrolled breeding of the onagers in the area creates a common identity for them, of locals who know their environment better than foreign elements who do not respect the place and do not consider the needs of the local population.

Despite the ambivalent relationship between humans and animals in this debate, conflicting opinions on the subject in the name of different interests, and a sense of hopelessness, it is precisely this debate that generates renewed attention to the area containing such exotic animals. The public discourse on the subject reinforces the perception of the desert as a place where one can still be impressed by wild nature, and where authentic close-to-nature Jewish and Bedouin inhabitants have local knowledge of the region and collaborate to reconstruct their local identity.

### **Conclusion: Links between the Domestic Donkey's and the Wild Ass' Representations**

In the existing literature on relations between the periphery and the center, the periphery is often referred to as one piece. In this paper, we have shown, through an ecocritical approach, nuances in the characterization of identities and lifestyles in the periphery by reviewing the representation of human-animal relations. We have used different representations of animals and human-animal relations in literature and public discourse. These representations reflect the different

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<sup>85</sup> Mosko, "Onager, Man."

reconstructions of local identity in different peripheral regions, on the continuum between proximity to nature (“wild animal”) and distance from it (“domestic animal”). The differences in images between the wild ass and the domestic donkey represent the two sub-categories of the different identities that are being built in the periphery.

On the one hand, in the far southern periphery, in the depths of the desert, the locals manage to overcome the transparent marginal image. They are constructing an image of a coveted place, with a powerful wildlife and brave inhabitants fighting for their place against and alongside biblical wild animals. On the other hand, Berdugo’s donkey is presented as a disciplined, non-fighting animal, suitable for life in the urban periphery, closer to the center, whose inhabitants are still struggling to define their identity and find their authentic voice. However, it is possible to recognize in this discourse the perception according to which the authentic and coveted desert image in the style of Mitzpe Ramon, could also permeate the urban periphery in the Ashkelon area and the development towns in the Negev. This tendency is expressed in Berdugo’s novel when the novel’s protagonist, Ruslan, imagines a different end for Donkey. According to this illusion, if he had acted like a wild animal and used his power to fight for his freedom, he would have survived:

The donkey has power. If only it wished to use it with one of the stiff hooves at the bottom of its thin, athletic leg [...] things would be different. And he wished he could see this all, [...] and also how Donkey goes then, leaves, jumps with a donkey’s speed, imitates the skips of an Israeli deer and hurries on the road, vanishes in the field, disappears into his life and ... all of these things Donkey did not do, because he did not kick.<sup>86</sup>

This description fits the message that emerges from the plot of Ruslan’s own search for authenticity and vitality. Throughout the article, we saw how both in the novel and the journalistic texts, the symbolism of the human-animal relations illustrates the social status of the inhabitants and even paves the way for a

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<sup>86</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 78.

pronunciation of knowledge coming from the south that permits social change and a solid local identity.

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