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**Stanford University**  
**Ca' Foscari University in Venice**

International conference  
*The reception of David Grossman and Hebrew literature in Europe and the US*

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**Davide MANO, Stefano ZOLLI**

***Tanin Pigu'a of Assaf Gavron: how to tell the two voices of the conflict***

Son of English immigrants, Assaf Gavron was born in Jerusalem in 1968. He lived for ten years in London and recently since 2010 he has been living in Berlin for one year. Gavron wrote and published four novels, a collection of short stories and a non-fiction collection of falafel-joint reviews. He translated from English to Hebrew Jerome David Salinger's *Nine Stories*, Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and Jonathan Safran Foer's novels. "In my novels", Gavron wrote in the American literary magazine *Guernica*, "I try to merge realist literary fiction with different genres: thriller, romance, detective, or science fiction, and place this blend in the confused, complex, often-mad, and always-singular mess that is contemporary Israel. Or at least I do my best to do so". Assaf Gavron is considered as one of the emerging voices in the "new generation" of Israeli literature. In a short article, Gavron mentioned five names of Israeli writers as innovative voices of their generation: Etgar Keret (the Ambassador of younger Israeli fiction), Michal Zamir, Sami Berdugo, Eshkol Nevo

and himself. “We are not the established, famous, celebrated older generation of Israeli authors”, Gavron explained, “we offer a different tone; call it lighter, more cutting edge, or daring: whatever it is, we don’t seem to carry the same weight on our shoulders”, and “while the previous generation demonstrated a social coherence, we offer a more fragmented, varied outlook for our country”.

Gavron's fourth novel *Tanin Pigu'a* was published in Israel in 2006. It tells in first person and in alternating chapters the two stories of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the period of the terrorist attacks of the second intifada. Eitan Enoch (nicknamed Croc) works at *Time's Arrow*, a high-tech company in Tel Aviv which deals with optimizing the use of time (with voice messages or by setting traffic lights). He miraculously manages to survive three attacks, making himself into a sort of national hero who is invited to talk shows on TV. Fahmi Sabih, who is same age as Croc, is a Palestinian from Murair village, whose father dreams of a future for him at the Bir Zeit University; contrary to these wishes Fahmi is instead forced to follow in the footsteps of his brother Bilhal, a terrorist who lives in Amari refugee camp and is one of the organizers planning the attacks in which Croc is involved. The novel starts with the Israeli protagonist who is riding to work on the number five minibus:

*“We were heading down Dizengoff Street when an elderly lady turned to me. Quietly she said: 'Doesn't that man look suspicious?' (...) With her eyes she indicated a dark guy at the front. We were sitting at the back. He was wearing a grey wool hat and holding a suit in a suit bag. (...) 'Come on, don't exaggerate,' I said, 'He looks fine to me.' But I kept looking at him. (...) The old lady got off at Jabotinsky Street. She didn't trust our judgement. On her way out she gave the dark guy a long look. He looked back at her. I*

*didn't think at that moment that his look meant anything. (...) 'Everyone's under pressure, eh?' the other guy at the back said. He had a little goatee and big aviator sunglasses with mirrored lenses. His hair was the colour of honey, held back with plenty of gel, darkening into curls at the back. Cool, at least in his own eyes. Pleasant smile. Giora, I know now. Giora Guetta, from Jerusalem. I know plenty of things now. (...) 'This paranoia ...' I said. 'People are completely crazy.' 'He looks OK to you, right?' I looked once more towards the dark guy. I wasn't sure. Who could be sure?"*

A week after the publication of the novel's first chapter in the newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, before the book came out in bookstores, Assaf Gavron and Zmora Bitan Publishing House were sued by a female driver of a minibus who claimed Gavron wrote about her. The book was revised in some parts and publication postponed. Once published, the interest that Israeli readers gave to *Tanin Pigu'a* was still not high: the book sold less than one third the number of copies compared to his previous novel *Moving*, the best seller story about three Israeli boys working for a moving company in New York.

The Israeli public kept away from a novel that reproduced, in the form of fiction, the tragedy of the attacks and the subsequent traumas experienced. In addition, the refusal to empathize with the hard life of the Palestinian “enemy”, imprisoned in the villages and grappling with the Israeli check points, was evident. In a recent interview Gavron said: “When I wrote the book, in Israel we were living a very hard period, it was the time of the attacks. It was clear that people didn’t want to read things like that. Another problem, in my opinion, was that the Palestinian character was described with great empathy. To my great joy, however, outside of Israel this was my most successful novel”.

As a matter of fact, *Tanin Pigu'a* attracted much more attention in Europe and US than in Israel. Countries where translations were released include Germany, Netherlands, Italy, the UK, the US and Canada, and will also comprise France and Greece. This paper is thus intended to analyse the reception of the novel outside Israel. In a period comprised between 2008 and 2011, we will consider the cases of Germany, Italy, the UK and the US.

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*Tanin Pigu'a* came out in Germany in March 2008 under the title *Ein Schönes Attentat* (A beautiful attack) and was translated from Hebrew to German by Barbara Linner. This was the first Western-language edition of a book by Assaf Gavron. The editorial contacts with Germany began almost by chance: during a period in the States in a residence for writers, Gavron was introduced by a writer from Berlin to a German agent who showed a great deal of interest in his new novel. Gavron prepared an extract in English translation, worked on it with the agent in Berlin and within a month *Tanin Pigu'a* was sold to Random House. Beginning with this contact with the German agent, the other European and American editions of the book emerged.

In Germany *Tanin Pigu'a* was a big success with critics and audiences and in 2010 a second edition came out in paperback. "The country where the book has sold more is Germany, there is selling very well, more than other countries, more than Israel", Gavron says. In Germany there have been many positive reviews of the book: in newspapers, radio, websites. The German literary critic Sigrid Löffler

wrote: "This novel is cleverly constructed, very contemporary in its subject matter and, because of Gavron's critically equitable narrative posture, exceptionally interesting." According to Radio Gong the opinion is even more enthusiastic: this "is the best modern novel to come out in Israel in the last years". Gavron explained the interest in the book by foreign publishers as follows: "I think that in Europe, for example in Germany and perhaps also in Italy, it was the political balance, the fact that there were the two parts, the two voices, that there was no preferential treatment accorded to one of the two fronts".

In the context of Israeli-German cultural ties Gavron received a fellowship for 2010 from the Deutschen Akademischen Austausch Dienst (German Academic Exchange Service) in Berlin. During his stay, while also writing a new novel, he toured various German towns for some readings: "Germans love to read and hear the writers. The readings are organized by the publisher and the public pays. It is a good opportunity for a writer to meet readers, booksellers and even journalists". Moreover, in an interview for a German website dedicated to the dialogue with the Islamic world, Gavron told Ariana Mizna that "people in Germany for instance reacted very positively to the book; they say that the book gave them a real insight to the lives of people here. They have seen the headlines down through the years, but are now getting to know two sides without prejudices. So I think literature can influence, and it can educate as well".

In Germany, after *Tanin Pigu'a*, other two of his novels were published: *Hidromania* (in March 2009) and *Moving* (German title *Alles Paletti*, in September 2010). Even more significantly, the movie studio "Arden Film" in Berlin decided to buy *Tanin Pigu'a's* copyright in view of a movie adaptation. More recently, Gavron

has been appointed a member of the jury for the “Best First Feature Prize” at the “Berlinale International Film Festival 2011”.

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The 2009 Italian edition originated in the wake of the success attained by the book in Germany. Italian writer Helena Janeczek read the novel in German and proposed it to Mondadori Publishing House. As she explained: “What struck me most was that the book focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that, while doing so, it took full advantage of the tools of the novel, representing ordinary lives, using the mechanism of empathy with the main characters and creating a well-structured plot to make the tragic matter of the narration captivating. I also appreciated the use of irony, that in this case doesn't intend to create distance, but it rather seems to reflect warmth, once more empathy”.

The Italian edition was included in the Mondadori's top series “Strade Blu” and was characterised by the publisher's decision to opt for a different title, far from the Hebrew one: “La mia storia, la tua storia” (My story, your story). This new title puts the emphasis on the *bipartisan* configuration of the book, but neglects a key-word, “attack”, present in the Hebrew (*pigu'a*) and in most Western translations (attentat, attack).

A further difference between the Italian and the German case is about the reception of the book: while in Germany promotion had been effective and contributed to the author's popularity, in Italy this significant encounter with publishers and readers didn't occur for various reasons. Janeczek explained a

broader problem concerning the place of literature in Italian media: “The press agent of Mondadori told me that newspapers often reacted to the presentation of the book with unfair remarks such as: once more with this story of Israelis and Palestinians! It seems that the subject matter didn't attract the Italian media... Even more than this - Janeczek pointed out - in the present state of our cultural pages, books lacking top promotion are usually penalised as well as new foreign authors”.

The few number of reviews published in the Italian newspapers seems to confirm this lukewarm reception. The review published in the daily *La Stampa* by Mario Baudino is the most receptive: Baudino sees the originality of the book “in the fact that an Israeli author succeeds in making his worst enemy talk”. Baudino defines Gavron as “a skilful constructor of plots” and his novel as “a book that upsets because of its absolute desire for sincerity”. On the contrary, the short review published in the daily *La Repubblica* by Susanna Nirenstein seems to bear crucial importance to the fact that from Gavron's novel one can draw a positive picture of a pluralist Jewish State and a free Israeli society, in strong contrast with a sick Palestinian world embodied by terrorism “that poisons villages and creates crazy anthills”. But these political remarks can in no way be ascribable to the perspective adopted by Gavron, who is far from advancing such unconditional judgements.

In contrast with the general reception, it is significant to note how in Italy the novel has gained particular success among readers from the Italian Jewish milieu, to the extent that it has been one of the three finalist books in the Italian Adei-Wizo Literary Prize in 2010 and since then it has merited further attention in the Italian Jewish press.



The 2010 British and American editions of *Tanin Pigu'a* are the fruit of the same work of redaction. The English translation was prepared by Gavron himself, who was asked for the first time to render a Hebrew text into a foreign language. Quoted in the credits is also British author James Lever, who contributed to the final editing. The British edition appeared in February 2010 for Fourth Estate, while the North-American was released in April for Harper Collins and Harper Canada. Different marketing plans made the book presented in the UK under the title “Croc-Attack!” (strictly faithful to the Hebrew), while in the US and Canada the chosen heading was “Almost Dead” (actually a very effective title in its double reference to the main characters' condition). As in Germany, the book was launched through a series of public meetings and readings at universities, literary festivals and bookshops in London, New York, Cambridge and Los Angeles.

British reviewers often focused on the Israeli character, while the American placed more emphasis on the presence of the Palestinian counterpart. British reviews were often signed by journalists with a comprehensive knowledge of Israeli reality: as a result, their comments gave importance to details. Reversely, the American reviewers proposed a broader reflection with the purpose of provoking a new debate on terrorism, starting from the author's suggestions.

The idea of an Israeli-Palestinian conflict fostered by multiple opposite narratives is regarded as true by British journalist Edward Stourton, who praises the author for offering a picture even more “real” than that of a reportage. In her review Zena Alkayat recalls how the same urgency of writing soon after the events

drove New York writer Jay McInerney to write his book “The Good Life” immediately after September 11. According to Los Angeles Times' editor David L. Ulin, the presence of the Palestinian character besides the Israeli one is an invitation for the reader to reconsider “the very nature of terrorism” from both perspectives and personal sufferings. As Ulin pointed out, Eitan and Fahmi “are framed as symbols for causes that may not be their own. Each tries to find a passage through the madness but remains buffeted by circumstance”.

In the UK the success of sales has brought to the re-edition of the book after about one year from the first edition. In a different way, as a result of the attention given to the novel in the US, the author has been invited as “artist in residence” at Chapman University in Orange, CA, in the context of the Schusterman Visiting Artist Program.

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In summary, according to what emerged from our investigation, Assaf Gavron's *Tanin Pigu'a* has enjoyed in Europe and in America a largely positive reception that has contributed to making this novel an interesting literary case. However, the story of the book's reception that we have outlined here has brought to light considerable differences from country to country. In Germany, where the book was first launched and where Gavron's novel gained the greatest success, the fact that stands out most is the inclusion of this emerging Israeli author in the arena of German cultural events.

On the contrary, in Italy the novel didn't attain particular prominence in the

media, with the exception of the Italian Jewish milieu, where it gained recognition. The Italian edition was confronted with a certain reluctance manifested by the daily press towards the “age-old” and “overexposed” subject of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a result, few reviews found their place in the Italian cultural pages.

British criticism, more than anywhere else, has put emphasis on Gavron's writing and the authenticity of his language. The political balance that characterises the book remains here also, as in the German and Italian cases, at the core of the enthusiasm manifested by critics. However, another matter to be appreciated is the inclusion of multiple individual narratives. The American press has pointed out how this powerful construction has exposed the “real” nature of a conflict in which the opposing fronts are not so far one from the other, but they tend to get close and confused, to intertwine with one another. Without ever running the risk to take the side of suicide bombers nor to justify their extreme act, the novel gives voice to an ordinary and anti-heroic humanity, often shadowed.

In conclusion, we can agree with Shoshana Kordova who in her article for *Ha'aretz* explained the success of the book outside Israel with the fact that “for those who haven't lived through the period it portrays, the very existence of a single work encompassing both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives constitutes grounds for profuse literary praise”. If in Europe and America the book received positive reviews and registered good sales, on the contrary in Israel the Hebrew first edition sold much less than expected and local press tended to reject the book, probably because of its topical interest. Israelis, who tragically lived the period of the second intifada, probably chose not to relive those traumatic days in fiction. The critic as well as the reader mostly rejected the “crocodile of the attacks” (*tanin ha-pigu'im*)

created by Assaf Gavron, one of their newer leading writers.