Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities
Bodies of Knowledge across Generations and Geographies
edited by Piera Rossetto, Hadas Shabat Nadir, Aviad Moreno

Beyond the Myth: Kaniuk's Critique of Jewish-Israeli Masculinity

Adia Mendelson-Maoz
Open University of Israel, Isreal

Abstract This essay discusses Yoram Kaniuk's (1930-2013) literary approach to Jewish-Israeli masculinity as a performance rather than an essential identity. Instead of rejecting Zionist masculine ideals, Kaniuk created alternative geographic, temporal and symbolic spaces where different masculine performances became possible. The analysis of *Himmo King of Jerusalem* (1966), *Life on Sandpaper* (2003), and *1948* (2010) demonstrates fracturing heroic embodiment through abject survival, spatial displacement enabling alternative performance, and temporal distancing that expose the gaps between myth and memory.

Keywords Jewish-Israeli masculinity. Sabra myth. Yoram Kaniuk. Performance of identity. Trauma.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Diaspore 23
e-ISSN 2610-9387 | ISSN 2610-8860
ISBN [ebook] 979-12-5742-004-8 | ISBN [print] 979-12-5742-005-5

Peer review | Open access
Submitted 2025-04-01 | Accepted 2025-10-19 | Published 2025-12-15

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-004-8/004

1 Introduction

In a short article entitled "Benny's Friends" written in the 1970s, Kaniuk utilized a striking metaphor to depict the performative dimensions of wartime masculinity. His description of the war machine reads:

> We were cowboys on a giant game board. There were orders that came from somewhere, and people walked tired and sang to avoid falling asleep and conquered another village and another outpost, then retreated, and then were shot and died. This is how you build a state, and it was born there on the hills of Jerusalem […]. The war for Jerusalem was a mass suicide of young children, and no one protested it. They didn't even distribute medals. (Kaniuk 1973, 27)[1]

This image of soldiers as "cowboys on a giant game board" captures the essence of Kaniuk's understanding of masculine performance in the context of state-building: young men enacting predetermined roles on a stage they neither designed nor fully comprehend. War becomes their stage, while they remain external to the script that would later endow their actions with mythic meaning. They walk, sing, conquer, retreat, and die according to "orders that came from somewhere", where their bodily performances constitute the raw material from which the *sabra* myth would later be constructed.

This performative complexity defines Kaniuk's relationship with the myth of Jewish-Israeli masculinity. On the one hand, Kaniuk himself embodied an idealized version of this masculinity: born in Tel Aviv, he fought in the 1948 war and later worked on ships bringing Holocaust survivors to Israel. Even his move to New York was driven by the need to seek treatment for his war injuries at Mount Sinai Hospital. On the other hand, through his writings, Kaniuk systematically critiqued and deconstructed this myth to reveal Jewish-Israeli masculinity as unstable and far from fixed.

Rather than approaching this contradiction through biographical analysis, this article examines how Kaniuk's literary works, and not his explicit statements about masculinity, engage with and deconstruct Israeli masculine identity. A close analysis of his fictional narratives and autobiographical and autofictional writings reveals how literary representation itself can become a critical tool for exposing the performative dimensions of gender identity. This approach is particularly crucial for understanding Kaniuk's

1 Quotations from Kaniuk's novels that have been translated into English are taken from the official published translations. All other translations from Hebrew sources are by the Author.

work, where the relationship between life and literature remains deliberately complex. Even in texts that appear to be based on his biography, Kaniuk consistently incorporated playful and self-conscious elements when constructing his literary persona. This artifice itself was part of his critique of authentic masculine identity, which suggested that all identity performances involve elements of construction and theatricality.

The central argument advanced here is that the importance of Kaniuk's works does not lie in rejecting Israeli masculinity but in performing it differently. His texts demonstrate how the sabra myth functions as a performative identity that can simultaneously be inhabited and undermined. By embodying the warrior-hero while exposing its limitations, Kaniuk created a literary and political space for more complex expressions of Jewish-Israeli masculinity that can accommodate vulnerability, diasporic sensibility, and artistic pursuit alongside national commitment.

2 Theoretical Background

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir observed that "A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex. It goes without saying that he is a man" (Beauvoir 1956, XV). This reflection shows how masculinity functions as an unmarked, seemingly natural category that requires no justification or explanation. Men, Beauvoir suggested, are not compelled to perform or prove their gender identity in the way that women, who are constituted as a minority and perceived as 'other' must constantly do. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argued that "there is no becoming majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian" (1987, 106). In their framework, hegemonic identities such as masculinity and whiteness appear stable precisely because they serve as the unmarked norm against which all other identities are measured and found wanting.

The emergence of masculinity studies in the aftermath of the second wave of feminism during the 1960s began to challenge this apparent stability by revealing masculinity as performative rather than essential. The shift from 'woman' to 'gender' studies enabled the examination of manhood as a social role which, like femininity, provided scholars with a new vocabulary to question the stability and universality of identity categories (Adams, Savran 2002, 3-4).

Jewish masculinity has always been marked by instability. As George Mosse noted, normative masculinity is defined

> by the existence of a negative stereotype of men who not only fail to measure up to the ideal but whose body and soul were

> its foil, projecting the exact opposite of true masculinity. Groups marginalized by society, such as Jews and blacks, fulfilled this role. (1996, 6)

The seeming naturalness of hegemonic masculinity depends on the constant exclusion of alternative masculine performances. Jewish masculinity, which has historically been positioned as minoritarian and 'other', provides a particularly revealing case study for examining these performative processes, since its marginalized status makes visible the constructive mechanisms that hegemonic masculinity typically conceals.

For centuries, European Jews were viewed as an inferior minority. Anti-Semitic stereotypes portrayed Jewish men as weak, feminine, and physically inadequate. Their "misshapen bodies" were viewed as examples of degeneration (Mosse 1996, 6). In response, Eastern European Jewish communities actively constructed alternative masculine ideals that privileged scholarship and spiritual strength over physical prowess, creating what Daniel Boyarin described as an intentional differentiation from gentile masculine norms (1997, 4-5). The Zionist movement sought to transform this identity by advocating for a "new muscular Jew" who would embody physical strength and national commitment (Nordau 1955; Yosef 2004, 19). This transformation involved both rejecting diaspora Jewish masculinity and internalizing Western European masculine ideals. Crucially, it also required navigating internal hierarchies between Eastern and Western Jewish identities. As Aziza Khazzoom showed, East-West categories were employed to create social hierarchies within Jewish society (Khazzoom 1999). This effort extended beyond responding to anti-Semitic discourse to encompass a sustained drive toward Westernization and the elimination of Orientalist attributes, a process that would later manifest in Ashkenazi-Mizrahi tensions within Israeli society. (Khazzoom 1999, 385)

The sabra emerged as the culmination of this project where native-born Israelis embodied the ideal of the 'New Jew' without requiring the psychological transformation of their immigrant parents (Almog 1997, 14-15; Shapira 1996, 12). The sabra myth combined physical and spiritual qualities into what R.W. Connell termed a normative masculinity that provided "a clear inventory of a man's physical traits and modes of behavior" (1995, 70). During the struggle for statehood, this included the mythologization of fallen soldiers as *akudim* (bound) or the 'living-dead'; i.e., figures who remained eternally young and heroic in collective memory (Maoz 1995, 11; Miron 1992; Gluzman 2007).

The myth of the sabra became highly influential in the early Israeli state and was embedded in ideological texts and disseminated through education. However, Hebrew literature consistently reflected

its complexities. Discussions of Jewish masculinity became central to this evolving Hebrew literature, which was primarily written by male authors (Gluzman 2007; Peleg 2006). From Peretz Smolenskin, Judah Loeb Gordon, and Mendele Mokher Seforim, to later figures such as Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Saul Tchernichowsky, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and twentieth-century writers such as Moshe Shamir, Nathan Alterman, and A.B. Yehoshua, Hebrew writers frequently addressed Jewish masculinity and the male Jewish body.

Performance studies can provide a theoretical foundation for analysing Kaniuk's work. Reading masculinity in the context of performance studies opens up new possibilities for analysing how cultural identities are constructed, maintained, and transformed through literary representation. As Dror Harari showed, performance studies offer both systematic methodology and critical deconstructive praxis that expose the ideological nature of performative behaviours. This approach remains underutilized in Israeli humanities research (Harari 2018, 534). Performance studies reveal that apparently natural or essential identity is actually produced through repeated acts of cultural inscription that both constitute and potentially subvert normative categories (Schechner 2006; Carlson 1996). Literary performance creates the very subject it appears to express through what Schechner termed 'restored behaviour'; i.e., the repetition and variation of cultural scripts that precede any individual enactment (Schechner 1985, 36). Even a seemingly 'authentic' autobiographical performance involves complex negotiations between mimesis and self-presentation which reveal that "the role the actor now plays is a role which she claims as her own, but it remains a role, still deeply involved in both mimesis and representation" (Carlson 1996, 604). Thus, these performative roles need not maintain internal consistency; rather, they can simultaneously embody contradictory elements and competing cultural demands. Victor Turner observed that the "self is presented through the performance of roles, through performance that breaks roles, and through declaring to a given public that one has undergone a transformation of state and status, been saved or damned, elevated or released" (Turner 1987, 81). In this sense, performance inherently contains possibilities for both reproducing and subverting normative structures through 'misperformance', a non-standard enactment that fissures the surface of the representation and allows alternative meanings to emerge (Harari 2018, 532-3).

Yoram Kaniuk's literary engagement reveals the performative nature of sabra masculinity with particular intensity. From the image of the wounded war hero to the bohemian artist, Kaniuk's works demonstrate how masculine identity functions as repeated performance that can constitute but also potentially subvert normative categories. His writing exposes the gap between

idealized sabra identity and lived experience, which creates space for alternative performances of Jewish-Israeli masculinity that accommodate Mizrahi identity, diasporic sensibility, and artistic expression alongside warrior credentials.

This study focuses on three key manifestations of Kaniuk's critique. First, in *Himmo King of Jerusalem*, I examine how he fractured the heroic body by exposing the myth of noble sacrifice through depictions of wounded soldiers' grotesque reality. Then, based on *Life on Sandpaper*, I explore how his New York period was not an escape from Israeli identity but rather experimentation with alternative performances that combined warrior credentials with the artistic and erotic freedom unavailable in 1950s Israel. Finally, I analyze his deconstruction of military heroism in *1948* which presents the war as a series of traumatic experiences undergone by confused young men manipulated by ideological forces. Each of these works constructs alternative temporal or symbolic spaces that exist outside normative Zionist geography, thus enabling experimentation with masculine performances that would be impossible within the conventional Israeli cultural frameworks of the time.

3 Dismantling the Myth of the Living Dead in *Himmo King of Jerusalem* (1966)

Himmo King of Jerusalem (1966) engages directly with one of Hebrew literature's most powerful masculine archetypes initially formulated in Nathan Alterman's phrase – *ha-met ha-hai* (the living dead). In Alterman's influential image, the dead soldier returns from the grave not as a grotesque spectre but as an inspiring presence who guides the living toward honourable action, even unto death. This figure sanitizes battlefield mortality and transforms the gory reality of war into a spiritualized national ideal that preserves fallen heroes as eternally young, beautiful, and morally instructive.

Yoram Kaniuk's *Himmo King of Jerusalem*, written in 1966, is set during the 1948 war. It tells the story of Hamutal, a young, secular Ashkenazi woman from Tel Aviv whose fiancé was killed in the fighting in the Galilee. She joins a convoy to Jerusalem, and when reaching the besieged city, she makes her way to the monastery of St. Jerome, which has been repurposed as a military hospital. There, she cares for Himmo, a traditional Sephardi native of Jerusalem who has been fatally wounded and longs for death. In an act of compassion, Hamutal ultimately administers a lethal injection to end his suffering.

Kaniuk's *Himmo* offers a devastating counter-narrative to the Zionist symbol of the living-dead. This is done first through its engagement with Christian martyrological imagery. The monastery setting, Hamutal's nun-like appearance, and explicit references to

the crucifixion ("They're crucifying Himmo there on an olive tree") invoke a martyrological tradition that makes suffering visible rather than transcendent (Kaniuk 1966, 145). Unlike the *akedah* tradition that preserves Isaac's life and body intact, or Alterman's living-dead who return spiritually purified, Christian martyrology centres on the wounded body as a site of meaning, as Kent Brintnall showed in his analysis of masculine suffering in religious contexts (Brintnall 2011, 132). As Gershon Shaked observed, Kaniuk's work transforms the Hebrew sacrifice narrative by moving "closer to that of Jesus than to that of Isaac" (Shaked 1997, 74). This alternative religious framework allowed Kaniuk to present the abject survival of the mutilated living as potentially meaningful rather than simply tragic, thus revealing the performative nature of heroic masculinity by presenting an alternative embodiment that the dominant culture could not accommodate.

The graphic representation of Himmo's mutilated body serves as the novel's central confrontation with heroic mythology. The systematic dismemberment of his body in the text with the "right leg missing, left leg missing, one arm missing from the elbow, the other hand missing from the wrist; lacerated belly" is depicted as "crushed stumps of limbs, a trunk swathed in bandages, blue shrapnel marks, some embedded in the flesh and some skin-deep, red, gaping wounds, and the stink of rotting flesh" (Kaniuk 1966, 34-5) and creates what Julia Kristeva termed the "abject" (Kristeva 1982, 4). Norbert Elias noted in an analysis that drew on Mary Douglas's concept of pollution that cleanliness and order are essential to the social structure, thus making the grotesque body a fundamental disruption (Elias 1978; Douglas 1966). This catalogue of missing limbs and gaping wounds systematically dismantles the intact masculine body valorised in sabra iconography and exposes the material cost of heroic ideology that remains unable to fulfil its spiritual promise.

The novel's treatment of sexuality and gender further reveals the performative dimensions of masculine identity. Himmo's mouth becomes the site of both his remaining beauty and his sexual availability: "It was a beautiful mouth […] A delicate mouth, somewhat feminine, but with firm, bold lines" (Kaniuk 1966, 35-6). Hamutal's penetration of his mouth with her fingers represents what Ilana Szobel identified as a role reversal that challenges normative masculine sexuality (Szobel 2021, 77). Himmo's inability to initiate sexual contact transforms him from active masculine subject to passive object of desire: a position that renders him socially illegible as a man.

Himmo's character functions as what Maya Barzilai termed a *golem*, and raises fundamental questions about nationalist sentiment and the willingness to sacrifice young men for ideological causes (Barzilai 2016, 109). As Raz Yosef argued, the wounded soldiers

"aim to present a version of masculinity that willingly surrenders to magnificent passivity", by celebrating what he termed "liquid, uncovered, unsutured masculinity" that challenges coherent male identity (Yosef 2004, 71). Himmo exists as a grotesque, hybrid figure that brings the concept of the abject to its peak by disrupting modern notions of boundaries while challenging traditional ideas of masculinity and warriorhood.

Kaniuk's unflinching portrayal of those who could neither live the sabra myth nor die for it and instead remain suspended in a twilight zone of damaged survival, was deeply unsettling at the time of its publication and remains so today. Even in contemporary discourse after October 7th, the numerous wounded remain largely invisible in public consciousness, and the fragile condition of the hostages is euphemistically labelled 'psychological terror' precisely because their vulnerability disrupts images of strength and the robust body. Such representations upend narratives of victory and national triumph, as they always have. Yet Kaniuk did not seek to suppress these alternative performances but rather to create a literary space where they could exist without requiring elimination or erasure.

Within this framework of alternative masculine performances, Kaniuk's portrayal of Mizrahi masculinity reveals both a critique and the reproduction of stereotypes. Yochai Oppenheimer's analysis of Mizrahi literature suggests that it "discovered physicality not only for its own sake but also for the sake of Hebrew literature's dual liberation from the Zionist body and the dichotomous perceptions concerning it" (2010, 182). Marco, Himmo's brother, embodies the negative stereotypes of Sephardim: a well-dressed figure with 'primitive nobility', who is likened to a criminal and profiteer. This stereotypical representation is problematic, and Kaniuk can be legitimately criticized for reproducing orientalist imagery. Nevertheless, the novel's performative logic ultimately subverts this stereotype. Despite Marco's stereotypical 'dangerous' masculinity, it is Himmo – the vulnerable, feminized figure who cannot conform to masculine norms – who must be eliminated. This suggests that the real threat to social order is not stereotypical 'Oriental' masculinity but alternative masculine performances that refuse predetermined scripts. In fact, despite the stereotype, Marco poses no actual threat. Instead, it is Hamutal, the Ashkenazi nurse, who becomes the agent of violence. This representation thus undermines its own stereotypical foundation by showing that the supposedly 'dangerous' Mizrahi man is ultimately harmless, while the 'caring' Ashkenazi woman becomes the killer.

Hamutal's ultimate rejection of Himmo occurs precisely when the war's end threatens to return them to normal social reality. As she contemplates returning to "Tel Aviv, about the sunshine and the white buildings, about a return to normal life", she realizes that their

relationship cannot survive outside the monastery's suspended reality (Kaniuk 1966, 198). Her decision to administer the lethal injection does not stem from mercy but from her inability to accept alternative masculine performance within conventional social frameworks.

Himmo's death paradoxically restores his heroic status by transforming him from an embarrassing survivor into a properly fallen soldier. This restoration exposes how heroic masculinity does not depend solely on men's symbolic function within national mythology or on lived experience. The 'King of Jerusalem' who cannot rule over his own body becomes a king only in death, when his actual experience can be safely contained within memorial narrative.

The novel's conclusion reveals the cultural impossibility of deviating from prescribed gender performances within the Israeli society of the time. Each character in the Zionist narrative seemingly has a designated role: men must fight and potentially die heroically, Mizrahi men are expected to perform either criminality or exotic otherness, nurses must heal and maintain proper feminine boundaries. Superficially, all the characters in *Himmo* appear to fulfil their assigned parts: Himmo fought and was wounded, Marco embodies stereotypical Mizrahi masculinity, Hamutal is the devoted nurse. Yet the novel reveals how these performances ultimately fail or require violent enforcement to maintain their coherence. What emerges is the breakdown of performance itself, and captures the moment when cultural scripts prove inadequate to contain lived experience. Himmo's alternative embodiment exposes the exclusions necessary to maintain normative masculine performance, while the novel's monastery setting creates the temporary space for different possibilities that must ultimately be foreclosed. The tragedy lies not in Himmo's wounds but in a culture that can only accommodate masculine performance that conforms to predetermined scripts, thus revealing the fragility and violence underlying apparently natural gender roles.

This subversive potential helps explain why *Himmo King of Jerusalem* was only adapted for film in 1987, more than 20 years after its publication by Amos Gutman, a director known for his provocative and transgressive films. This delay suggests that the novel's challenging content required significant cultural shifts before it could find visual expression. Significantly, Gutman's *Himmo* appeared the same year as another film adaptation: *I Don't Give a Damn*, based on Dan Ben-Amotz's 1973 novel about a war-wounded protagonist. This parallel trajectory that both address wounded masculinity through alternative narrative strategies can also be linked to their shared experiences in 1950s New York. The synchronous appearance of these two films in 1987 suggests a broader cultural readiness to confront the costs of heroic masculine ideals that had been developing since

their earlier collaborative experiments with alternative masculine performance.

4 When the Sabra Myth Meets 'The Wandering Jew': Life on Sandpaper

In the collective biography of Hebrew writers, leaving one's birthplace tends to be understood as crucial for artistic maturation and creative development. This pattern of artistic pilgrimage can be traced through several generations of Hebrew literature such as Peretz Smolenskin's transformative journey to Odessa in the nineteenth century, where he encountered European literary movements, Micha Josef Berdyczewski's travels to Central and Western Europe seeking philosophical and cultural renewal, S.Y. Agnon's formative Berlin period, which exposed him to modernist literary techniques, and Avraham Shlonsky's Parisian sojourn where he absorbed avant-garde poetic innovations. For these writers, geographic displacement served multiple functions including escape from the intellectual limitations of traditional Jewish communities, encounters with broader cultural movements, and the distance needed to develop a critical perspective on their own cultural inheritance. Their wanderings westward often represented attempts to shed perceived Oriental origins and embrace Western cultural forms, yet paradoxically, this displacement frequently intensified rather than resolved questions of Jewish identity and belonging.

At the turn of the twentieth century, these journeys became closely linked to the *talush* (uprooted) archetype in Hebrew literature, as documented by scholars such as Nurit Govrin and Heddy Shait (Govrin 1985; Shait 2015). Berdyczewski captured this existential state in works such as "Menachem", where the protagonist exists as "a stranger here and there; he is a stranger in the world and in life" (Berdyczewski 1900). The *talush* figure embodied the painful liminal position of the modernizing Jew caught between traditional and modern worlds, and unable to fully inhabit either (Shaked 1977).

Kaniuk's generation, however, faced fundamentally different circumstances. Writers such as Dan Ben-Amotz and Amos Kenan, Kaniuk's contemporaries who similarly sought creative liberation by moving to Paris and New York, did not inherit the constraints of traditional Jewish society but rather the overwhelming expectations of the newly established Israeli state. As Kaniuk commented in an unpublished notebook found posthumously in his estate, he

> arrived in New York empty and broken and full of bitterness toward his country and his past and how he would never return to it, between one song of longing and another, to the beloved and

> cursed land where he was born, where all his friends were killed to give it a name on the map. (Archival materials found in his estate)

His life in New York is depicted in two major novels, *Susetz* (*Rockinghorse*, 1973) and *Life on Sandpaper* (2003). Kaniuk also published several short stories in the newspaper *Ma'ariv* during the 1980s; other unpublished drafts and materials still remain in his estate. The novels and stories describing his time in America reveal another facet of his engagement with the myth of Jewish Israeli masculinity. In these texts, the main character, who is either a reflection of Kaniuk himself (Naftali in *Rockinghorse*) or presented directly as Kaniuk, is a wandering Jew, a melancholic figure who paints and frequents the New York bohemian scene.

New York becomes what Victor Turner terms a "liminal space"; a threshold zone where established social structures are temporarily suspended, thus allowing for experimentation in identity that would be impossible within normative contexts (Turner 1969, 95). The liminal quality of this existence appears in the novel in the scene where he calls Information asking for his own phone number, reflecting a need for external confirmation of his existence – a moment that captures the fundamental disorientation and self-questioning inherent in this transitional state. Yet Kaniuk's *talush* performance involves conscious choice and theatrical self-presentation rather than psychological affliction. Like all performances, it contains repetitive and artificial elements such as the strategic deployment of Israeli war veteran credentials, which enable him to cultivate his image of the tortured artist-warrior.

This strategic marginality manifests in Kaniuk's deliberate affiliation with New York's artistic underground rather than mainstream American society. His New York experience engaged deeply with Beat culture, as influenced by the spirit of Jack Kerouac's world of jazz, girls, booze, drugs, freedom, and a sense of movement, as Tom Kellner showed in her analysis (Kellner 2015). He was not alone in this choice. Dan Ben-Amotz was a faithful companion during these experiments, who similarly sought creative liberation through his association with the city's fringe groups. Ronny Someck pointed out that this reflects "all that jazz" of existence "on the edge", a quality that would later influence Kaniuk's distinctive stream-of-consciousness writing style (Someck 2003): Kaniuk crafted "a single line of 400 pages" that captures this liminal existence.

The novel starts with the motto "Luck Be a Lady", referencing a song by Frank Loesser from the 1950s' musical *Guys and Dolls*, which was popularized through Frank Sinatra's performance in the 1955 film adaptation featuring Marlon Brando. The musical centres on two gamblers from New York, during the gambler's final game, where winning could restore his relationship with his beloved and

ultimately lead to his retirement from a life of gambling and excess. The phrase "Luck be a lady" not only evokes the Brando-Sinatra milieu of bachelorhood and masculinity (also addressed in the text) but also conveys the symbolism of 'the last game', suggesting a sense of transience and an interim state which, if fate favours him, could lead to a different life. This temporal framework of liminality and potential transformation permeated Kaniuk's entire New York experience. His edge-walking involved careful management rather than complete abandon, such as avoiding hard drugs while engaging in considerable consumption of alcohol that allowed him to inhabit the margins without total dissolution. His heavy drinking became part of this temporal performance, and enabled what he termed a lifestyle "like rowing a boat with a glass bottom over the sewers of America" (Harel 2003, 53), a precarious balance that could tip toward either salvation or destruction.

Contemporary research on gender and migration demonstrates how migration processes reshape masculine identities in complex ways. Katarzyna Wojnicka and Paula Pustułka observed that "migration as a process influences the changes in defining, negotiating and performing masculinities" (2019, 92). The diverse experiences of male migrants emerge from the intersection of multiple factors made up of class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and family status, which create distinct social positions and outcomes. Although Kaniuk represents one specific example, understanding that men's spatial experiences are "intersectionally entangled with the question of power" (Wojnicka, Pustułka 2017, 89) helps show how his time in New York shaped his masculine identity through complex dynamics of marginalization and privilege. Rather than hiding his Israeli military background, Kaniuk transformed it into social capital within Beat culture. His war veteran status granted him access to artistic and erotic experiences while his Israeli exoticism provided performative advantages unavailable in conservative 1950s Israel. As Tamar Hess noted, this work served as "Kaniuk's identity card as an artist" by reflecting the shock of war, unfulfilled romantic relationships, and his journey from Little Tel Aviv to the wider world, all of which are milestones that shaped his identity as an artist, painter, and writer (Hess 2003, 26).

The novel's treatment of sexuality reveals how Kaniuk transformed traditional *talush* performance. As noted by Gershon Shaked, the *talush* figure in Hebrew literature was characterized by profound erotic dysfunction (*mimush eroti*), reflecting the psychological and physical inadequacy of the uprooted intellectual caught between worlds (Shaked 1977, 27-30). This lack of erotic fulfilment was central to the *talush*'s condition, because it symbolized a more general inability to achieve integration or satisfaction in any sphere of existence.

Yaron Avituv pointed out that in this novel "story chases story, bottle chases bottle, fuck chases fuck" (Avituv 2003). The memoir starts with an explicit juxtaposition of military trauma and erotic possibility: "There had been a war and I was wounded. When I got back, I was remote and detached from everything, didn't speak for days, and would draw on the walls because I'd killed people before I'd kissed a girl" (Kaniuk 2003, 9). This foundational statement is suggestive of the cultural constraints of Zionist masculine expectations that prioritize collective sacrifice over individual intimate fulfilment. Kaniuk writes that

> the girls in my days wouldn't tell a man he was handsome. They'd say he was smart or pioneering […] Only when I got to America did they tell me I was handsome. At 21, I learned for the first time that I had something attractive; it was too late to change that image. (Amir 1997, 59)

The Zionist realization of masculine ideals explicitly excluded sexuality, creating a fundamental tension that required geographic displacement to resolve. This juxtaposition of war and romantic encounters shapes the narrative's trajectory. The story begins with a night spent with a nameless girl, still haunted by nightmares of the Gestapo, and continues with his journey to Europe to rescue Holocaust survivors, alongside vivid depictions of prostitutes in Naples. The image of foreign girls emerges in other texts as well. In an unpublished manuscript Kaniuk sent to his friend Jay Lavee, several intertwined stories focus on different girls who are not Jewish; he meets them on ships, in Paris, or in New York, suggesting that the protagonist can only access overt sexuality through these encounters. This pattern which is reminiscent of the 'gentile woman' motif in Eastern European Jewish literature, represents an attempt to distance his identity from what he experienced as the castrating context of Zionist masculinity. Unlike the traditional *talush* figure's erotic dysfunction, Kaniuk describes his extraordinary sexual successes in these relationships. The narrative structure, organized around his relationships with various women, highlights both the expectation of masculinity expressed through battle rather than intimacy, and the possibility of experiencing erotic desire when one is 'out of the house'. However, this erotic freedom functions as performance rather than authentic fulfilment, because of its reliance on displacement from familiar cultural contexts and its inability to provide lasting satisfaction or genuine integration into American society.

5 Hollow Fighters – *1948*

> Oh, on those nights years ago. We used to run along the sands with a stick and shout insults at the moon, I would cook potatoes and tell jokes. On these sand dunes we grew up, […] Afterwards, they would say: What youth, what lack of culture, corrupt youth, *sabra*, the prickly pear cactus, boorish, inhuman, insolent, […] Suddenly, as if forgotten, we became the future of the nation, the silver platter, heroes of Israel […] we were like gods overflowing with titles to the point of bursting, mighty, wise, terrible, wonderful […] The period in which we were a state and a shoulder passed quickly, we remained people who need rehabilitation. (Kaniuk 2018, 109)

This monologue from Kaniuk's posthumously published novel *Soap* reveals the performative arc that structures his understanding of wartime masculinity. The progression from ordinary childhood activities such as "running along the sands with a stick", "cooking potatoes" to mythic heroism exposes the constructed nature of the sabra ideal. The same behaviours that were once dismissed as signs of cultural deficiency suddenly became the foundation for national mythology when reframed within the narrative of state-building.

This trajectory from ordinary boys to mythic heroes to traumatized survivors found its fullest expression in Kaniuk's seminal work *1948*. The novel, published 60 years after the war that haunted Kaniuk throughout his life represents not merely delayed testimony but a fundamental shift in cultural discourse that finally enabled him to confront the performative dimensions of wartime masculinity. As Motti Golani and Mitch Ginsburg noted, the book does not attempt to offer a balanced historical account but rather presents the war through the limited perspective of personal testimony (Golani 2010; Ginsburg 2013). Kaniuk himself acknowledged that "[m]emory is deceitful and mocking, and it can change reality for us" and openly admitted that his work is a story rather than documentary or historical research (Regev 2012, 13; see also Shapira 2011). This temporal distance proves crucial: only by writing during a period when critical evaluations of Israeli military culture had become more legitimate could Kaniuk fully expose the chasm between mythic expectations and lived experience.

Kaniuk's emphasis on soldiers as ordinary young men rather than idealized sabra figures extends beyond their lack of ideological understanding to encompass their fundamental alienation from the national project they were supposedly creating. He openly admitted that his comrades were not "people like Dado, Uzi Narkis, or Yitzhak Rabin, the Tel Avivians, the so-called 'beautiful Israel'" but rather *horranim* (rabble) who entertained themselves by "blowing out candles with farts" (Druzd 1999). This deliberate emphasis on their

crude, non-heroic behaviour serves to highlight the performative disparity between the mythic expectations placed upon them and their actual capacity to fulfil such roles.

The disconnection between soldiers and their mythologized role became central to Kaniuk's testimony. Although the cover of the book that reproduces Kaniuk's 1953 oil painting of the Israeli flag speckled with red (blood) stains suggests a kind of national signature, the novel itself is far from a typical Zionist text (Eshel 2012, 73-4). Specifically, it severs the connection between the soldiers' actions and the ideological framework that would later give them meaning: "It's a mistake to think that we fought for the establishment of this state. How were we to know how to establish a state? Had anybody done it before us?" (Kaniuk 2010, 14). This deliberate performance of incomprehension challenges the retroactive heroization of the sabra fighter by suggesting that the mythic masculine ideal was imposed upon rather than embodied by those who engaged in its foundational actions. Soldiers become unwitting actors in a script they neither wrote nor understood, and their bodily performances are later reinterpreted as conscious expressions of national commitment.

The ethical dimension of this struggle becomes particularly acute in Kaniuk's depiction of his ideological background and its collision with wartime reality. Throughout *1948*, he presents himself as someone who came to the war with clear moral principles since he was a member of *Ha-shomer Ha-tzair* that believed in binational coexistence between Jews and Arabs. Yet the memoir systematically documents how these principles collapsed under the pressure of military action. In a conversation with Yashka the Partisan, a Holocaust survivor who would later die in Kaniuk's arms during the war, Kaniuk received a brutal education in wartime pragmatism: as Yashka remarked, war has no morality and is never moral.

This ethical disillusionment becomes central to his testimony through his unflinching account of his own actions during the war. Kaniuk describes his shooting of a Palestinian child and his participation in the brutal expulsion of Palestinian civilians, without evasion or justification. These acts, carried out in direct contradiction to his binational ideals, reveal the complete breakdown of the moral framework that was supposed to guide the 'new Hebrew man'. Rather than presenting these actions as regrettable necessities within a larger just cause, Kaniuk exposes them as fundamental violations of the very values that the Zionist project claimed to represent. His willingness to document these moral failures without a redemptive narrative demonstrates how the vast discrepancies between ideological commitment and military performance destroys not only the mythic coherence of the sabra identity but also the ethical foundations upon which it was supposedly built.

This moral alienation, combined with their ideological incomprehension, contributes to the mechanical quality of the soldiers' actions. Kaniuk's approach deliberately fragments the teleological narrative of state-building, by instead revealing the fundamental disconnect between the soldiers' lived experience and their mythologized role. In the novel's opening chapter, he describes his wartime actions as a repetitive cycle: sleep, wake up, eat, fight, bury "as if there had been absolutely nothing inside my battered skull. We were like kids, so shamefully young, volunteers, we were boors, partisans" (Kaniuk 2010, 11). This mechanical enumeration of their actions strips away any heroic significance by presenting warfare as bodily routine rather than an ideological commitment. Cut off from both an ethical framework and ideological understanding, they become young men executing orders without the conviction that the sabra myth assumes they possessed.

Kaniuk's depiction of the soldiers disconnect from the very moment of statehood they were allegedly fighting to achieve is perhaps the most revealing. When describing how the news of independence reached them, they are depicted as bewildered bystanders:

> Come, let us arise and sing "Hatikvah" […] and we told the jerk, Crap! We don't even know the words, and anyway, where has Ben-Gurion established his state? And he said he'd heard that he'd established it in Tel Aviv, and we said, look, we're under siege here, in Jerusalem, we're in Bab el-Wad and there's no state here, and Jerusalem isn't in the State of Tel Aviv, and we fell asleep. (Kaniuk 2010, 17)

This scene crystallizes Kaniuk's fundamental insight into the performative nature of national identity: the soldiers who performed the foundational actions of state-building remained external to its symbolic meaning. Their crude response of "Crap! We don't even know the words" to the suggestion that they sing the national anthem reveals the dissociation between their lived experience and the ceremonial expectations of national belonging. The geographic distinction they draw between 'the State of Tel Aviv' and their besieged position in Jerusalem emphasizes their alienation from the national project: they fight and die while the state is declared elsewhere, by others, without them. Kaniuk's insistence on the soldiers' ignorance of their historical role represents more than simple narrative strategy. It exposes the performative disparity between the lived experience of warfare and its mythological representation by demonstrating how masculine ideals are projected onto rather than expressed through individual performances of military service.

6 Conclusion: Staging Masculine Identity

Throughout his literary career, Kaniuk developed emblematic strategies for challenging normative expressions of Israeli masculinity. Rather than rejecting the sabra myth entirely, his works create alternative spaces where different forms of masculine performance become possible. Each of the texts discussed in this article constructs its own staging that enables experimentation with identity outside the constraints of conventional Zionist discourse.

Kaniuk's *Himmo King of Jerusalem* creates what might be termed a 'heterotopic staging', a space that is fundamentally separate from normative Zionist geography that enables alternative masculine performances. As Victor Turner observed, cultural performance operates in the subjunctive mood of culture, in "a world of 'as if,' ranging from scientific hypothesis to festive fantasy" (Turner 1982, 83). The monastery-turned-hospital functions as a deliberate spatial intervention by removing characters from social structures that would otherwise police gender conformity. Within this liminal medical space suspended between life and death, the sacred and the secular, Himmo's fragmented, feminized masculinity can be explored without immediately triggering the social mechanisms that would eliminate such alternatives in ordinary Israeli space.

Similarly, Kaniuk's New York functions as deliberate spatial staging that enables alternative masculine performance outside the constraints of Israeli cultural geography. The liminal American space operates according to different performative rules, where Israeli military credentials become exotic social capital rather than obligatory national identity. This geographic displacement creates a subjunctive cultural space constituting a realm of experimental possibility where normative Israeli masculine scripts can be temporarily suspended and reconfigured. The Beat culture milieu, with its jazz clubs, bohemian communities, and artistic underground, provides the environmental staging necessary for Kaniuk to perform Israeli masculinity in ways impossible within conservative 1950s Israeli society. This staging enabled him to combine warrior identity with artistic expression, erotic experimentation, and individual exploration while maintaining core Israeli elements. Yet this spatial strategy proved necessarily temporary since this liminal staging could not provide a permanent alternative to Israeli cultural geography. It served solely as an experimental laboratory for expanding the possibilities of masculine performance.

1948 was Kaniuk's his most devastating critique of sabra mythology from within the Israeli cultural context itself. Unlike his earlier works, where traumatized protagonists sought escape through geographic displacement, this mature work illustrates how the temporal distance of 60 years, combined with the evolving

discourse around military trauma and national mythology, enabled him to deconstruct the sabra myth from within. While the novel does not create a separate physical space such as the monastery or New York, it constructs an alternative conceptual staging through the systematic alienation of the soldiers from their own actions and historical role. By describing their performance Kaniuk creates a critical space within the foundational narrative itself. This internal displacement proves even more radical than geographic escape, since it reveals the sabra myth to be an external imposition rather than an authentic expression of those who performed its constitutive acts.

These alternative stagings reveal the fundamental tensions and contradictions inherent to any attempt to perform Israeli masculine identity. Kaniuk's works show that masculinity cannot be understood as a singular performance but rather as a field of competing enactments, each requiring specific spatial and temporal conditions to become viable. His works make it clear that the most radical critique of normative masculine performance may come not from those who reject it entirely, but from those who inhabit it fully enough to reveal its constructed nature from within. By creating literary spaces where alternative masculine performances become temporarily possible, Kaniuk's work anticipated the eventual recognition that Israeli identity itself must accommodate multiple, often contradictory ways of being Israeli, an acknowledgement that remains as urgent today as it was during his generation's foundational struggle.

Bibliography

Adams, R.; Savran, D. (2002). *The Masculinity Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Almog, O. (1997). *The Sabra: A Profile*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved. (In Hebrew).

Amir, G. (1997). "Despair Became More Comfortable: An Interview with Yoram Kaniuk". *Yediot Ahronot*, November 7, 56-9. (In Hebrew).

Avituv, Y. (2003). "Around the Bonfire". *Ma'ariv NRG*, May 30. (In Hebrew).

Barzilai, M. (2016). *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters*. New York: New York University Press.

Beauvoir, S. de [1949] (1956). *The Second Sex*. Transl. H.M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape.

Berdyczewski, M.J. (1900). "Menachem". *Ben Yehuda Collection*. (In Hebrew). https://benyehuda.org/read/4481.

Boyarin, D. (1997). *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of Jewish Man*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Brintnall, L.K. (2011). *Ecce Homo – The Male Body in Pain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Carlson, M. (1996). "Performing the Self". *Modern Drama*, 39(4), 599-608.

Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dekel, M. (2011). *The Universal Jew: Masculinity, Modernity, and the Zionist Moment*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Deleuze, G.; Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Druzd, A. (1999). "The Palmah Family". Radio discussion. (In Hebrew).
Elias, N. (1978). *The Civilizing Process*. Transl. by E. Jephcott. New York: Urizen Books.
Eshel, A. (2012). "'I Said Unto You When You Were in Your Blood, Live': Yoram Kaniuk's Tashah". *Jewish Social Studies*, 18(3), 70-84.
Gavron, A. (2003). "A Writing Style that is Actually a Lifestyle". *Haaretz Books*, July 30. (In Hebrew).
Ginsburg, M. (2013). "Clinging to Life, a Master Produces a Wrenching Memoir of the War of Independence". *Times of Israel*, April 17.
Gluzman, M. (2007). *The Zionist Body: Nationalism, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature*. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad. (In Hebrew).
Golani, M. (2010). "*1948* by Yoram Kaniuk". *Haaretz*, July 9. (In Hebrew).
Govrin, N. (1985). *Detachment and Revival*. Tel Aviv: Ha-universita ha-meshuderet. (In Hebrew).
Harari, D. (2018). "Everything is Performance". *Theory and Criticism*, 50, 531-51. (In Hebrew).
Harel, M.; Za'arur, S.; Mishani, D.; Schwartz, Y. (2002). "Like Someone Who Came from Another Place: An Interview with Yoram Kaniuk". *Mikan*, 3, 180-99. (In Hebrew).
Harel, O. (2003). "Beat and Thrown in New York: Interview with Yoram Kaniuk". *Ma'ariv NRG*, May 30, 51-4. (In Hebrew).
Hess, T. (2003). "Like a Jazz Performance". *Yediot Ahronot*, Musaf July 11, 26. (In Hebrew).
Kaniuk, Y. (1966). *Himmo King of Jerusalem*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved. (In Hebrew). Transl. by Y. Shechter as *Himmo King of Jerusalem*. New York: Atheneum, 1969.
Kaniuk, Y. (1973a). "Benny's Friends". *Davar*, May 4, 1973, 26-7, 36. (In Hebrew).
Kaniuk, Y. (1973b). *Susetz*. Merhavia: Sifriat ha-poalim. (In Hebrew). Transl. by R. Flantz as *Rockinghorse*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
Kaniuk, Y. (2003). *Haim al niyar zekhukhit*. Tel Aviv: Yediot Sfarim. (In Hebrew). Transl. by A. Berris as *Life on Sand Paper*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011.
Kaniuk, Y. (2010). *Tashah*. Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot. (In Hebrew). Transl. by A. Berris as *1948*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.
Kaniuk, Y. (2018). *Sabon* (*Soap*). Tel Aviv: Yediot Sfarim. (In Hebrew).
Kellner, T. (2015). "Between Conformity and Resistance: The American Beat and Yoram Kaniuk". *Hador*, 125-36. (In Hebrew).
Khazzoom, A. (1999). "Western Culture, Ethnic Labeling, and Social Closure". *Israeli Sociology*, A.2, 385-423. (In Hebrew).
Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Transl. by L.S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
Maoz, A. (1995). *Ritual of the State of Israel 1948-1956*. Sdeh Boker: Ben Gurion University. (In Hebrew).
Miron, D. (1992). *In Front of the Burning Fire – The Poetry of War of Independence*. Jerusalem: Open University; Keter Press. (In Hebrew).
Mosse, G.L. (1996). *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Nordau, M. (1955). *Zionist Writings*, vol. A. Jerusalem: Ha-Sifrya ha-tzionit. (In Hebrew).
Oppenheimer, Y. (2010). "Becoming a Mizrahi Body in Israeli Fiction". *Theory and Criticism*, 36, 161-84. (In Hebrew).

Peleg, Y. (2006). "Heroic Conduct: Homoeroticism and the Creation of Modern Jewish Masculinities". *Jewish Social Studies*, 13(1), 31-58.
Regev, M. (2012). "Interview with Yoram Kaniuk". *Yisra'elim*, 4, 13.
Schechner, R. (1985). *Between Theatre and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Schechner, R. (2006). *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. New York; London: Routledge.
Shait, H. (2015). *Here are Two Paths: From Exile Displacement to Indigenous Displacement in 20th Century Hebrew Literature*. Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University. (In Hebrew).
Shaked, G. (1977). *Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880-1980*, vol. 1. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad; Keter. (In Hebrew).
Shaked, G. (1997). "The Right to Scream". *Akhshav*, 65, 66-92.
Shapira, A. (1996). *New Jews, Old Jews*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.
Shapira, A. (2011). "Jerusalem in 1948: A Contemporary Perspective". *Jewish Social Studies*, 17(3), 78-123.
Someck, R. (2003). "All This Jazz". *Iton 77*, 281, 8. (In Hebrew).
Szobel, I. (2021). *Flesh of my Flesh: Sexual Violence in Modern Hebrew Literature*. Albany: State University of New York.
Turner, V. (1969). "Liminality and Communitas". *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 94-131.
Turner, V. (1982). *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.
Turner, V. (1988). *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications.
Wojnicka, K.; Pustułka, P. (2017). "Migrant Men in the Nexus of Space and (Dis) Empowerment". *NORMA. International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 12(2-3), 89-95.
Wojnicka, K.; Pustułka, P. (2019). "Research on Men, Masculinities and Migration: Past, Present and Future". *NORMA. International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 14(1), 91-5.
Yosef, R. (2004). *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.