Poetics of Identity: Mizrahi Poets between Here and There, Then and Now

by Esther Schely-Newman

Abstract

The Israeli literary scene, particularly in the early years of the state, tended to represent the Israeli Zionist life, expressed in Eurocentric style and modes. Nevertheless, other voices and alternative narratives of the Israeli experience are heard, offering different styles and flavors, challenging the dominance of the hegemony and the ethos of mizug galuyot *[merging of exiles] that negated Diasporic existence in the process of emergence of a new Hebrew people.*
In this paper I wish to demonstrate how renowned Mizrahi poets cope with the boundaries of poetics in relation to the Israeli "Other." The poets are roughly divided between "founding fathers," who arrived to Israel as children, and younger poets of Mizrahi origins born in Israel. The paper focuses on poems that specifically deal with Mizrahi-Ashkenazi relationships, themes that continue to concern migrant poets. The chronological perspective allows considering the content of poems as well as new venue of disseminating poetry – the Internet – that enables variations of positioning oneself vis-à-vis *the literary hegemonic establishment.*

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Introduction

Rihal Madrid
by Ronny Someck

ma nish-ar mib'itat haga'agu'im
shel rabbi yehuda halevi?
ulay kadur mitgalgel 'al deshe novel
ben sha'ar hamizrah lesha'ar hama'arav

[What remains of the yearning kick
Of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi?
Perhaps a rolling ball on fading grass
Between the goalpost of the East and the goalpost of the West.][1]

What remains of the past once people leave their homeland and make *Aliyah* - ascend to the Land of Israel? Ronny Someck takes the yearning of millennia - sung on the rivers of Babylon, inscribed in liturgy and in Jewish memory - and sets this in the soccer field of Real Madrid Football Club. Through this playfulness, Someck mixes liturgy, nostalgia, and the Holy Land with contemporary times and places. Using the assonance of the acronym of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (Rihal), the 11-12th-century Spanish philosopher and poet, with the name of the football club, Someck questions the contemporary meaning of the well-known poem of longing for the Holy Land: *libbi bamizrah vaanokhi besof ma'arav* [my heart is in the East and I am at the end of the West]. Someck's own short poem thus connects times and places, with East and West valorized and assigned ethnic identities rather than representing geographical directions.

This paper analyzes attitudes towards these issues from the point of view of Israeli Mizrahi poets and their relations with the Other, the Israeli literary milieu – the Ashkenazi establishment. I focus on the meaning of peripheral poets within the Israeli ethos of erasing the past concurrently with nostalgic longing for the old countries and languages. Israel and *hutz la-aretz* - the countries outside the Holy Land - Hebrew versus the various mother tongues, and the attempt to create a dialogue that may bridge ethnic tensions between Mizrahim and

[1] Ronny Someck, *Ha-metofef shel ha-Mahapecha* [The Revolution Drummer] (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 2001), 30. By permission of the poet. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my literate (not poetic) renditions of the original texts.

Ashkenazim. Based on previous studies of Mizrahi poets who migrated to Israel as children (Mois Benarroch, Erez Biton, Sami Shalom Chetrit, and Ronny Someck), I compare their attitude to that of younger (relatively less studied) poets of Mizrahi origins born in Israel (Adi Keissar and Roy Hasan). The paper expands the arguments developed by Alon, Mendelson-Maoz, and Oppenheimer[2] about the meaning of being Mizrahi in the Israeli literary scene, adding the contemporary *'Ars Poetiqah* phenomenon.

Background

Jewish ethnic identities in Israel are a thorny issue. Smooha identified the ethnic gap as one of the major sources of social inequality in Israel as early as 1978.[3] Studies by leading sociologists and anthropologists since then have focused on the process of constructing Israeli identity out of the different ethnic groups comprising Israeli society. Other scholars, such as Ram, Swirsky, and Yonah,[4] have demonstrated the interaction between plans for population dispersal and the ongoing problems of sociocultural gaps. The ideology of *mizug galuyot* [merging of exiles] assumed that the Israeli project would result in creating a new people turning its back on the old exilic identities to become Israelis; denial of the diaspora (*shlilat hagalut)* – if not of exile per se – is the upshot. Differences, it was argued, will disappear with intermarriage, so that within a few generations ethnic difference will no longer exist. However, Talia Sagiv,[5] who analyzed narratives of Israelis born to Mizrahi-Ashkenazi parents, found that the "half-and-half" Israelis continue to maintain ethnic identities, overriding their "Israeliness." Their perceptions follow stereotypes that equate *Mizrahiyut* with

[2] Ktzia Alon and Yochai Oppenheimer, *Ana min el-Maghreb: Reading Erez Biton Poetry*, (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2014); Ktzia Alon, *A Third Option for Poetry*, (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2011); *To Dwell in a Word*, ed. Ktzia Alon, (Gama Publishing, 2015); Yochai Oppenheimer, *Diasporic Mizrahi Poetry in Israel*, (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012); all in Hebrew. Adia Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel: Literary Perspectives*, (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2014).

[3] Sammy Smooha, *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

[4] Shlomo Swirsky, *Lo Nehshalim ela Menuhshalim: Mizrahim and Ashkenazim In Israel,* (Haifa: Mahbarot Leviqoret, 1981); *Israeli Society: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Uri Ram, (Tel Aviv: Breirot Publishing, 1993); Yossi Yonah, *In Virtue of Difference: The Multicultural Project in Israel*, (Jerusalem: Van Leer Publishing, 2005). All in Hebrew.

[5] Talia Sagiv, *Hetzi-hetzi: Israelis of Mixed Ethnic Origins*, (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2014). In Hebrew.

warmth and closeness, while the *Ashkenaziyut* has the associations of intellectualism, coldness, and better chances of upward mobility.

In recent years, the topic of social inequality based on Jewish ethnicity has taken on a significant role in the media and popular culture. Television series such as the 2002 *Ruach Qadim* [Eastern Hot Wind] by David Ben Chetrit, which tells the story of the Mizrahi, mainly Moroccan, migration to Israel, were produced as a counter narrative to the well known television series *Pillar of Fire* (aired in 1981) and *Tequma* [Resurrection] of 1998 that ignored the contribution of Mizrahi Jews to the State of Israel. More recently, two television series focused on the treatment of Mizrahim in the early years of the state. *Salah Po Ze Eretz Israel* [Salah, This Is Israel], a documentary by David Der'i, aired in 2017, tells the story of Moroccan migrants in development towns. This was followed by the four-part series *Ma'abarot* [Transit Camps] aired in 2019, treating the mass migration during 1950-60. The struggle for recognition of alternative narratives continues, and the politics of identity appears in the literary field, perhaps as poetics of identity.

The difficulties of migration have been experienced by people of other ethnic groups. A recent anthology of Israeli poetry on these themes brings together poems written between 1923 and 2016 by men and women who arrived in Israel from places as far from each other as Russia in the East from Morocco in the West.[6] Alroey notes in his introduction that while studies in the social sciences usually treat migrants as groups, migration itself is an individual experience (p. 13). All poets, regardless of their origins, express the pain of leaving the known for the new and different. Exilic existence seems to continue in Israel, where the migrants still feel estranged; a displacement that takes on different forms, changing names, blurring landscapes, and rich in difficulties in the early encounters with the "natives" (Jews, *Sabarim*). The migration poems chosen by Weichart and Alroey for their anthology reinforce the relevance of the concept of diaspora in contemporary Israel, as argued by Oppenheimer and others.[7] For poets who "dwell in words," to cite Alon, the most difficult and painful is the pressure to adopt a new language. Silencing one's own language is more traumatic for poets from Arabic-speaking countries; in the words of Ronit Mazuz, "Woe is me that the language of the enemy is my mother tongue," or Almog Behar's poem, *Ha-Aravit sheli ilemet* [My Arabic is Mute], "...My Arabic

[6] *When I Arrived: Poems about Immigration to Israel*, eds. Rafi Weichert, Gur Alroey, ('Iton 77 Books, 2019). In Hebrew.

[7] Oppenheimer, *Diasporic Mizrahi Poetry in Israel*.

is scared / silently pretends to be Hebrew / … /and my Hebrew is deaf / Sometimes very deaf."[8]

Differences between poets who migrated to Israel and those born in Israel to migrant parents appear to be almost negligible in this recent collection, as are differences based on the countries of origin. Nevertheless, I wish to consider the struggle of Mizrahi poets of the migrant generation and those born in Israel to Mizrahi parents from two angles: the relationship with the Other, which is the Israeli Ashkenazi literary establishment, and the process of writing and dissemination of poems. My corpus includes early poems by Erez Biton, Ronny Someck, and Sami Shalom Chetrit, with Mois Benarroch as a link to the younger generation of *'Ars Poetiqah*, Adi Keissar and Roy Hasan. Given the extensive studies of Biton, Someck and Chetrit available to date, I will expand on the younger generation, which has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention.

Founding Fathers of Mizrahi Poetics

Erez Biton (born 1941 to Moroccan parents in Algeria, migrated in 1949), the "father of Mizrahi poetry in Israel," is the author of eight poetry books, the earliest published in 1976 and the latest in 2019. A laureate of the Amichai (2014), Bialik (2014), and Israel (2015) prizes in poetry and literature, Biton has thus enjoyed significant recognition starting almost 40 years after the publication of his first book. In 2016, he was appointed by Education Minister Naftali Bennett to head the Biton Committee to evaluate school curricula and enrich it with Mizrahi content.

Issues of identity and authenticity are central to Biton's poetry; his status as representing Mizrahi identity is seen in the choice made by Oppenheimer and Alon to use key phrases from his poetry as titles of studies of Mizrahi poetry: *ma ze lihyot otenti* [what does it mean to be authentic] or *ana min el Maghreb* [I am from the Maghreb]; taken from Biton's poem *Taktzir Siha* [Summary of a conversation].

In *Hatuna Maroqait* [Moroccan Wedding],[9] Biton attempts to connect the glorious past, the rich and beautiful traditions of Morocco, with the current

[8] *When I Arrived: Poems about Immigration to Israel*, eds. Weichert, Alroey, 184, 224. Mazuz and Behar were both born in Israel.

situation. The poem speaks directly to the Other, who is not familiar with Moroccan culture and seems to be oblivious to people from the periphery. Biton's plea to the Other for recognition ends with an open invitation:

> ... Whoever hasn't been to a Moroccan wedding, / here is a ticket, / come on in / to the disturbances / of the heart / that you couldn't ever kill.

The need for recognition by the Other, who stands in for the literary establishment, is evident in two other early poems, *Taktzir Siha* [Summary of a Conversation] and *Shir Kniya be-Dizengof* [Shopping Song on Dizengoff].[10] In "Summary of a Conversation," Biton wonders about his identity, opening the poem with a question, "What does it mean to be authentic?" followed by descriptions of behavior, name, and dress. In Hebrew peppered with Judeo-Arabic he declares:

> *Ana min el-Maghreb, Ana min el-Maghreb*
> [I'm from the Atlas Mountains, I'm from the Atlas Mountains]
> / .../ to sit in the Café Roval in brightly flowing robes
>
> //Or to proclaim out loud: "My name isn't Zohar,
> I'm Zayish I'm Zayish."

In this poem, Biton juxtaposes two options – to be part of the literary establishment, identified with the people sitting in Café Roval an option that requires him to change his fundamental self, or to remain "authentic," i.e., Moroccan. Biton emphasizes the differences by pointing to the Atlas Mountains, a part of Morocco that in Israel is synonymous with the birthplace of the "Shluh;" the nickname is a persistent ethnic slur.[11] He refers to the practice of changing the names of immigrant children, and to specific garments that mark

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[9] Translated by Ammiel Alcalay, in his *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing,* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996), 265-67.

[10] *Ibid*., 264-65.

[11] Koby Peretz, a popular Israeli singer of Moroccan origins, was accused of addressing the crowd at a private party as "*shluhim*" in November 2009. The family of the hosts sued Peretz for insulting the guests. Later on, in April 2010, Peretz sued the family for damaging his public image, claiming he had been misunderstood. The affair ended in reconciliation and mutual apologies two years later.

the otherness of Moroccans.[12] And yet, these attempts bear no fruit, and he finds himself,

> [...] / neither this nor that, /[...]/ and I fall between the circles /
> lost in a medley of voices.

The desperate attempt to belong is clearer in "Shopping Song on Dizengoff," but buying a shop on Dizengoff does not make any difference for the folks at the Roval Café, who speak a different language:

> I don't face the people at the Roval / but when the people at the Roval turn to me/ I unsheathe my tongue / with clean words, / Yes, sir. / Please, sir / very up-to-date Hebrew ...

All attempts fail because " ... the openings here / are impenetrable for me here." At the end of the day, the poet packs his things and "head back to the outskirts / and another Hebrew."

Dr. Sami Shalom Chetrit (born in 1960 in Morocco, migrated to Israel in 1963) is a political scientist, poet, and social activist. He is one of the founding members of *Kedma* ["To the East"], and *Hakeshet Hademoqratit Hamizrahit* [Eastern Democratic Rainbow] working for egalitarian education in periphery communities. He is also a professor at Queens College in NY, and currently the head of Screen Studies at Sapir College in Israel. His poetic works include several books, the first published in 1988, and the latest in 2015. The most vocal and angry poems appeared in *Shirim be-Ashdodit,*[13] which addresses life on the periphery and the experiences of an immigrant child, rejecting demands to erase the past in order to become Israeli.

Opening the collection is a blatant challenge to the Other; rather than looking for a dialogue, the author writes in a cryptic way, *Shelo Tavinu Mila* [so you won't understand a word]:

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[12] In his translation, Alcalay chose to omit the garment names. In Hebrew: *Lashevet beroval betziv'onin ('agal vezarbiya, miney levush).* My translation*:* To sit at the Roval in colors ('agal and zarbiya, types of garments).

[13] *Shirim be-Ashdodit* [Poems in Ashdodian] was published in 2003 and includes poems written between 1982 and 2002. *Shelo Tavinu Mila* was written in 1998.

> I write you poems/ in Ashdodian / *kus em em emkum/ chla dar bukem*[14] /so that you will not understand a word /

Cursing his audience is a response to indifference to the concerns of the poet's people:

> Who cares about you / *Oulad el Ahram*[15] / each one of you / when did you pay attention/...

The built-in contradiction - writing to an audience but denying their right to understand - speaks to the deafness of the Other, who refuses to recognize the plight of the periphery or even their language.

The mixture of languages and the struggle between wanting to be Israeli and at the same time wishing to retain some sense of the previous life is apparent in the poem *Ele Shemot* [These are the names], written in the spoken language of the periphery that mixes Hebrew, Judeo-Moroccan, and French. The voice of mothers calling their children to come home is loud and clear:
Allan, viye a-la-mezo, vit / Jacquie, tla' al-dar, d'ghya [16]

These names, redolent with the scent of *hus laares* [literally, in Moroccan Hebrew pronunciation: out of the land; the diaspora], are not acceptable in Israel. Following common practice, the teacher changes the diasporic names: no more Allan, Jacquie, Brigitte, Alice, but Ilan, Ya'aqov, 'Aliza, Zehava. This experience, shared by many migrants in Israel, referred to above in Biton's "I'm not Zohar, I'm Zayish," and still current among Ethiopians, is seen by Chetrit as yet another attempt to erase the memory of the old country. The need to preserve a bit of that past ends the poem:

> We knew. / But we insisted on / a bit more of an overseas scent / Before the ringing of bells is silenced: / Sami, Mimi,/ Rachelle, Mardoshe...

Opposition to the new language and names is evidenced both literally and metaphorically, by using words in other languages and the Moroccan

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[14] These are common Arabic curses in Israel, relating to the mother's private parts, then wishing destruction upon the father's house.

[15] "Sons of sin," a common curse in Arabic, both Moroccan and Palestinian.

[16] Translated by Ammiel Alcalay, in *Helicon* 117 (2016): 71. Note that Alcalay chose to translate the mother's call into standard form: "Allén, venez à la maison, vite."

pronunciation of some words, the sound /S/ instead of /TZ/ - *hus laares* (*hutz la-aretz), ksat* (*ktzat*, a little). Chetrit alludes implicitly to the core story of Jewish identity, the Exodus from Egypt. The title of the poem echoes the first words of the Book of Exodus: *Ele shemot bney Israel* [These are the names of the sons of Israel] (Exodus 1:1). The content alludes to a known Midrash enumerating the four reasons why the Israelites were worthy of redemption: they had not changed their names or their language, did not speak evil of others, and not one among them was sexually promiscuous.[17] The poem gestures in an opposite direction: those coming to Israel from other countries are coerced to change their names and their languages. Does this mean that the way back is barred? Once they change names and languages, they are no longer deserving of redemption, seen here as returning to the lands outside (*hus laares).*

The use of language is not incidental: this "peripheral Hebrew," as Henshke[18] calls it, is influenced by Judeo-Arabic and should be considered a language onto itself, not a deteriorated dialect of standard Hebrew. In another poem, *Freha shem yafe* [Freha is a beautiful name], Chetrit uses a nonstandard form of Hebrew in describing the reasons for choosing the name Freha.[19] Biton, too, uses a mixture of languages in his poems, as well as intentionally mispronounces words, such as "Dizengov" instead of "Dizengoff." This use of language reinforces what Alon identifies as the influence of traditional Jewish poetry that takes on a "local, Israeli scent."[20]

Ronny Someck is the most popular poet in Israel and the most translated into other languages. Born in Baghdad (1951), Someck arrived in Israel at the age of three, like Chetrit. He is younger that Biton, but both published their first poetry book in the same year, 1976, and the titles of their books bear a scent of the "old country" - *Minha Maroqait* [Moroccan Offering] and *Goleh* [Exiled].[21] These three poets are the best known of the first-generation Mizrahi poets who brought to the Israeli public voices and poetic styles different from the Israeli-Ashkenazi,

[17] Shir Hashirim Rabbah 84, also in Vayikra Rabbah 32.

[18] Yehudit Henshke, **"**Israeli, Jewish, Mizrahi or Traditional? On the Nature of the Hebrew of Israel's Periphery," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 68 (2017): 137-157.

[19] In Israel, the feminine name "Freha," which means "happy," became a slur usually describing a young woman of loud speech, extravagant dress, makeup, and more. It is mainly used to refer to a Mizrahi female, the partner of an 'ars (see below). See Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Freha shem yafe* (Nur Books publishers, 1995), 51.

[20] Alon, *A Third Option for Poetry*.

[21] Gil'ad Meiri, "Mizrahi Spearheads - Erez Biton and Ronny Someck: Two Options of Mizrahi Poetics," in *To Dwell in a Word*, ed. Alon, 351-88.

and were not involved in the local literary scene (those people at the Roval, in Biton's words). Yet they developed in different ways: Biton is seen as the "head of the Mizrahi tribe" and Someck as "one of the general Israeli tribes."[22] While Biton wrote about futile attempts to become part of the Israeli literary scene, Someck mixes the past (both remote and close) and present with a fair share of irony, "So what if I came here from the place where the Garden of Eden was," or "My grandfather was born in the Lands of Arak."[23] The all-Israeli experience is perhaps better expressed in his *shir patrioti* [patriotic song][24] that mixes derogatory terms for various Jewish groups,

> *Ani Iraq- pajama, ishti Romaniya, / ve-ha-bat shelanu hi ha-ganav mi-Bagdad*
> [I am Iraqi pajama, my wife is Romanian / and our daughter is the Thief of Baghdad]

Does such a mixture create a new identity? The poem that starts with the poet's inner circle – I, my wife, daughter, mother, sister – ends with a "we," a new entity still struggling, entangled in a futile battle - shooting at bright stars:

> *kulanu po'alim mefutarim shehurdu mipigumey hamigdal/ sheratzinu livnot bevavel*
> [We all are fired workers taken down from the scaffoldings of the tower / we wanted to build in Babylon] ...

Someck does not seem directly to address the "Other," whose existence remains implicit in his poetry. As noted by Mendelson-Maoz (following Alon's analysis), poetry has been given an elitist label usually accorded to Ashkenazi intellectual circles.[25] Humor serves Someck even when referring to ethnic inequality. This can be seen in his poem *Kav Ha-'oni* [poverty line], which begins: "As if you could stretch a line and say: below it, poverty" and ends with the point of view of a child living in a transit camp: "The only line I saw was the horizon and under it everything / looked poor."[26]

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[22] *Ibid.*, 354.
[23] Opening lines of Someck's poems *foto retzah* [mug shot] and *halav arayot* [lions' milk].
[24] Ronny Someck, *Mahteret Hehalav* [The milk underground], (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan publishing, 2005), 7.
[25] Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel: Literary Perspectives*, 89.
[26] Translated by Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden*, 1999, 326-7.

In a recent anthology of studies of Someck's poetry, Shakargi notes that his type of poetry can be described as "light verse," not "difficult poetry" (terms coined by W.H. Auden). Such poetry has characteristics identified in Someck's writing: communicative language, narrative poems, and themes from the everyday life of the poet and his entourage.[27] Furthermore, Someck writes about social inequality, the Mizrahi (and Palestinian) plights, but not in a confrontational manner. The few examples brought here reinforce what Meiri calls "popoetics," that is, using images taken from popular culture and street talk to create new and surprising figures of speech that blur the binary opposition of Jewish-Arab to create the potential for a new entity.[28]

Mois Bennaroch - Between Here and There

Mois Bennaroch can be seen as a connecting link between the forefathers of Mizrahi poetry and the younger *'Ars Poetiqah* movement. He was born in Tetouan, Spanish Morroco, in 1959, a cohort of Sami Shalom Chetrit, and his first poems were published in the military magazine *Ba-mahaneh* in 1979, coinciding in time with the first publications of Biton and Someck. But he arrived in Israel at the age of 12, and writes poems and novels in Hebrew and Spanish, his mother tongue. Israel has changed since the 1960s, yet the themes raised by Biton and Chetrit remain insistently present in Benarroch's poetry.

Issues of identity for a migrant, Moroccan, Spanish and Mediterranean, are major topics in his writing, underlined in the title of his first published poetry book, *Qinat ha-mehager* [The Immigrant's Lament],[29] a title reminiscent of Biton's *Minha Maroqait* (1976), and Someck's *Goleh* (1979). While the process of adjusting to the new country is common to all migrants, Benarroch emphasizes ethnicity as an obstacle to publication and acknowledgement. The futility of attempting dialogue with the "Other," which we saw in Biton and Chetrit, is

[27] No'a Shakargi, "Prologue," in *Milat hakavod shel harehov [The Street's Word of Honor: Reading Ronny Someck's Poetry]*, eds. No'a Shakargi, Yigal Shevars, Ketzia Alon (Gama publishers, 2019), 7-15. In Hebrew.

[28] Gil'ad Meiri, "Popoetics in Ronny Someck's Poetry," in *Milat hakavod shel harehov,* eds. Shakargi, Shevars, Alon, 48-86. Someck wrote about the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, as Hanan Hever and Yigal Shevars note in their contribution to this latest book.

[29] Published in Hebrew in 1994 by Yaron Golan. Translated into English in 2002. Note that Benarroch chose the term *mehager*, not *oleh*, which would instead valorize Israel as a place one "ascends to", rather than a more profane idea of relocation.

reiterated by Benarroch in curt form: *Sheqet, maqshivim la-Ashkenazim* [silence, we are listening to the Ashkenazis] is the title, and *Be-'etzem, ze kol ha-shir* [actually, this is the entire poem].[30] No further words are needed.

The struggle for publication is a Sisyphean effort, according to *Sheqet, hem hoshvim 'al ze* [Silence, they are thinking about it].[31] For thirty years he has been invited to discussions, hearing comments, but then they refuse to publish, or they think about it a little bit more. He concludes that the world could be a much better place if they would think of solving other problems instead. The poem ends with a sarcastic message, in an everyday low register: "Come on, if you are not able to decide/ think about changing your profession."

Problems of publication are partially solved by technology - the Internet - or private publishing ("vanity press"). Yet the struggle for recognition continues and receives a harsher treatment in his *"Hashir sheli 'al Bialiq"* [My poem about Bialik].[32] He curses the national poet, especially the fact that the Bialik literary prize has once more been awarded to an Ashkenazi poet. Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873, Ukraine - 1934, Tel Aviv), considered the greatest modern Hebrew poet, whose literary work is required reading in Israeli schools, appears in other poems as a symbol of cultural coercion, as in Someck's poem, *Hawaja Bialik*, about an Arab girl reciting Hebrew poems,[33] or as in Chetrit writing about "a Moroccan poetess who doesn't know Bialik."[34] Zionist symbols are a target of criticism, as in "Cause of death: Zionism" or "Balance of Terror," which juxtaposes the Establishment with its unending resources, with the poet, who has nothing but words.[35]

Biton's questions about authenticity receive a different treatment in Benarroch's poem, *"Otenti,"* which repeats phrases valorizing authenticity,

> *... "Ata lo maroqai otenti" / "Ata lo oman otenti" / ...*

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[30] Mois Benarroch, *The Sea Language*, (Tel Aviv: Makom Leshira, 2013), 51.

[31] *Ibid.*, 52-3.

[32] *Ibid.*, 73.

[33] Originally published in his 1994 *Bloody Mary* poem collection. Republished in *Gan 'eden le-orez* [Rice paradise], (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1996), 96.

[34] *Isha ahat maroqanit* [A Moroccan woman], written in 1984, included in *Shirim Be-Ashdodit*, 31.

[35] Mois Benarroch, *Ktzara Haderech* [The Road's Cut], (Muvan, 2014), 62, 40.

> ["You are not an authentic Moroccan" / "You are not an authentic artist"]

But authenticity for the poet is a fake quality, and therefore he concludes:

> *She-elohim yishmor oti / mi-lihyot otenti // Ani kol kach sone et ha-mila hazot.*
> [May God preserve me / from being authentic // I so hate this word.][36]

Oppenheimer suggests that Mizrahi writing is post-Zionist because it does not give up the old country to create a new identity; instead, it attempts to mend broken memory and not ignore the world left behind with its 'taboo memories,' as Ella Shohat calls them.[37] Benarroch identifies as Mediterranean, not limited to the boundaries of the new land, Israel. The title of Benarroch's 2013 book of poems, *Sefat Hayam*, perhaps best represents this "post-Zionist" position. The English title, *The Sea Language*, misses the polysemy of the Hebrew term: *Safa* in Hebrew means "language" as well as "edge" and "lip." *Sefat hayam* is also a beach, seashore. Benarroch positions himself at the edge of the sea, ready to incorporate multiple places without being limited within one country, one language, or one identity.

Technology - Third Millennium Poetry

A new wave of contemporary Mizrahi poetry emerged in January 2013 with a different style of poetry reading events. *'Ars Poetiqah* started as a onetime event by Adi Keissar (born 1980 in Jerusalem, of Yemenite origins), who said she was looking for a comfortable place for poetry.[38] The appropriation of the derogatory term *'ars* - pimp in Arabic, a word commonly used for a loud male, usually of Mizrahi origins - as title for an elitist activity of High Culture, poetry, is intentional. The Facebook page of the group describes the events as a *hafla* [feast], "Words dipped in Arak." At these events, poets read their works accompanied by music, food, and alcohol. Many *'Ars Poetiqah* events can be accessed through YouTube, enhancing their virality and thus contributing to the

[36] Benarroch, *The Sea Language*, 25.
[37] Oppenheimer, *Diasporic Mizrahi Poetry in Israel*, 63-70.
[38] Yoav Ben-Haim, *"Ani Hamizrahit,"* undated interview with Adi Keissar, at: https://amiaza.wixsite.com/babli5/me (2013), retrieved July 15, 2019.

popularity of the poets and the genre.[39] These events are opportunities for new poets; at least one unpublished poet reads their work on each occasion. Rather than waiting long years for the approval of the hegemonic poetic establishment, Keissar and other Mizrahi poets created their own type of poetic reading events. With the use of the Internet, established "gatekeepers," who prejudge the value of poetry to select works deserving to be published, become superfluous.

The need for a new style of reading poetry is explained in Adi Keissar's poem *Ani lo yoda'at lehakri shira* [I don't know how to recite poetry].[40] Keissar describes poetry events where the poets read their lines in serious, sad, or performing tones, all too pretentious and pompous in her view,

> .../and all I wanted was / that they recite as if / they are taking me to a meal/ family with their parents/ and in the middle when everyone is eating / to pick up / the tablecloth / and throw it up like that / in the air / with all the dishes. /...

It worked. The events became popular, with audiences of all ages from all walks of life, no longer a serious reading but a colorful festive occasion, a *hafla,* as can be seen in the descriptions of the participants and the many interviews Keissar and Hasan were invited to give in the Israeli and U.S. Jewish media.[41]

The sudden popularity of *'Ars Poetiqah* and its major figures needs to be examined within the context of technological development. The rise in the effect that social media have on poetry writing is not limited to Mizrahi poets. In her analysis of internet poetry, No'a Shakargi notes specific effects of technology and social networks on poetry, most important – of new ways for poets to produce, publicize, and disseminate their work.[42] These new modes of production have led to major changes, among them the elimination of former hierarchy and minimizing the role of "professional" gatekeepers. Furthermore, the new mode is fluid, publication is not necessarily the end point of creation, as poems can be re-formed and changed. Lack of hierarchy, explains Shakargi, has left judgment

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[39] The Facebook page, in Hebrew, had over 13,400 followers as of mid-July 2019.

[40] Adi Keissar, *Shahor 'al gabey shahor [Black on black]*, (Tel Aviv: Guerilla Tarbut, 2014), opening pages, not numbered.

[41] Wikipedia has a brief article in English on "Ars Poetiqah (Israel)," which quotes three descriptive articles in The Forward (2015, 2016) and The Tower Magazine (2015).

[42] No'a Shakargi, *Internetica - Poetry in the Internet Age*, (Master thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2015).

about poetical quality in the hands of the crowd, who express their likes or dislikes by entering poets' webpages and sharing their favorite poems with others, thus contributing to the growth of poets' popularity. This popularity, in turn, encourages traditional modes of publication in literary magazines and newspaper weekend editions.

Lack of traditional gatekeepers and the need for larger numbers of likes and extended online sharing may influence the content of poems, in controversial and confrontational slam poetry style. In Auden's terms (see above), this is easy poetry: the poems present social issues in a narrative way, sometimes to be read as social manifestos. No wonder that the English critic of these events received titles such as "The Mizrahi Thorn in the Side of Israeli Left Read"[43] and "Mizrahi Artists are Here to Incite a Culture War."[44] Many poems of the group are very long, and frequently address the Other, the Ashkenazi elite, yet from a different perspective than that of their forefathers, Biton, Someck, or Chetrit.

Adi Keissar gained popularity with her poem *Ani Hamizrahit* [I, the Mizrahi woman], which can be seen as a declaration of the new Mizrahi who refuses to be categorized according to common stereotypes.[45] She, too, speaks directly to the Other,

> I am the Mizrahi woman / that you don't know / I am the Mizrahi woman that you don't mention…

She is different because she does it all - she is familiar with the popular Mizrahi music ("I can recite all the songs of Zohar Argov"), but she has also read Camus and Bulgakov, and mixes all together. The new Mizrahi woman wants to be seen as she is, and in a direct affront, she tells the educated male,

> Don't tell me how to be a Mizrahi woman / even if you read Edward Said / because I am the Mizrahi woman / who is not afraid of you / not in search committees / not in work interviews/ …

[43] Madison Margolin, published in *The Forward*, September 3, 2015.
[44] Ayelet Tsabari, published in *The Forward*, March 16, 2016.
[45] Keissar, *Shahor 'al gabey shahor [Black on black],* 66-70. The feminist perspective is not addressed in this paper; a feminist review of Keissar's poetry cannot ignore other Mizrahi poetesses, from Bracha Seri to Amira Hess, Sheva Salhuv or Haviva Pedaya.

While her predecessors searched for approval or rejected potential dialogue, Keissar confronts the Other, repeating the question, *"ma ta'asu li?"* [what will you do to me?] four times in the poem. She blames the Other for ignoring ethnic problems:

> And you scold / if you stop talking about it / it will not exist anymore / if you stop talking about it / it will not exist anymore / because today everyone marries everyone / ...

In another poem, *sefat em* [Mother tongue],[46] Keissar refuses to be silent or to correct her Yemenite pronunciation, marked by the guttural *'ayin*:

> Don't tell my Hebrew / how to speak ... [...]
> Don't tie my tongue / it breaks like a wave / and blurts 'a 'a 'adi

In her second book of poems, *Muzika Gvohah* [High music],[47] we can also find a direct appeal to the privileged male, insisting on owning her voice and her narrative:

> I don't need / you to write about me / in your history books...
> I don't need you / to speak about me / on your radio waves/
> You will not be able to silence me / and mom speaks with *het* and *'ayin* /
> Though you have been trying for long / to wean her / from Arabic speech ...

The denial of ethnic problems and blaming the victims of social inequality are reflected in the first stanza of Benarroch's poem *Habe'aya lo qayemet* [The problem does not exist],[48]

> Since the problem does not exist / it is forbidden to speak about it / because if you speak about it /it means there is a problem /and therefore you are guilty of creating the problem/ ...

The two poems by Keissar reflect another thorny issue - the pronunciation of the guttural *het* and *'ayin*. This is also treated by Chetrit in his 1988 poem "On the

[46] *Ibid.*, 93.
[47] Adi Keissar, *Musika Gvohah*, ('Ars Poetiqa publishing, 2016).
[48] Benarroch, *The Sea Language*, 69.

way to 'Ain Harod,"[49] which describes the father's loss of the Arabic-like consonants after migrating to Israel.

Roy Hasan was born in 1983 to a mother born in Morocco and a father born in an Israeli transit camp. In October 2013 Hasan published his most famous poem, *bimedinat Ashkenaz* [in the land of Ashkenaz], in the daily *Haaretz.*[50] Hasan declared himself an anti-Zionist (a claim he retracted in 2018), a vocal critic of the Israeli Establishment, particularly the Left. The poem is a political manifesto about being marginal in the land of Israel,

> In the land of Ashkenaz the almond tree blooms / in the land of Ashkenaz they are waiting for a guest / not a partner / ...

The first two stanzas are a direct borrowing from a well known poem by Leah Goldberg, *Mi-shirey eretz ahavati,* which opens with the words, "In the land of my love the almond tree blooms / in the land of my love they are waiting for a guest..."[51] This intertextuality contrasts Goldberg's welcome with the way the Mizrahim were received in Israel, not as equal partners. The next lines of Hasan's poem invoke all the slurs, nicknames, and other references to the Mizrahim:

> I am a *mufleta,*[52] a *hafla, 'ars,* destroyer of all that was here when all was white.

The poem includes more references to what was expected of the new citizens, and ends with negation of the State of Israel:

> I do not celebrate your independence / until I have a state. / If you chase me away, I will go. / Just don't call me names, / you got that?

Hasan's rage against Zionism echoes two of Benarroch poems, "Cause of Death: Zionism," mentioned above, and - more specifically - *Ha-hodesh Ha-Mizrahi*

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[49] Chetrit, *Shirim be-Ashdodit*, translated by Alcalay*, Keys to the Garden*, 358.

[50] The poem was published in Hasan's first poetry collection, *Haklavim shenavhu beyaldutenu hayu hasumey peh* [The dogs barking in our childhood had muzzled mouths], (Tangier publication, 2014), 46-48.

[51] Goldberg's poem was not written about Israel; it is a popular Israeli song.

[52] A kind of waffle dipped in honey, a staple food identified with the Moroccan Maimuna, which is celebrated on the day following the end of Passover.

[The Mizrahi month]:[53] every day of the month has a specific activity for the Mizrahi person. Day 31 has too many activities, a very long sentence spaced only by a few commas, ending without a full stop:

> … , a day will come for a month to have a hundred and eighty days so that there will be enough place for all the nonsense the Ashkenazim made up about the Mizrahim and the Mizrahim already accept them as real truth and peace on Ashkenazi Israel

Hasan's criticism of the liberal Left is even clearer in another controversial poem, *kol ha'arsim yavou* [all the 'arsim will come].[54] This manifesto describes leftist "bleeding heart" liberals as hypocrites who dress like the homeless without revealing their grandparents' inheritance; who wish Muslims *Ramadan Karim* and enjoy the Muslim calls to prayer, but reject Jewish public acts of religiosity, and so on. Every segment of the poem begins with "I love those that…."[55] The end of the poem reveals the reason for the ongoing conflict:

> An Arab friend once told me about them - they will never / make peace, / because if there is peace, / all the 'arsim will come.

The notoriety of *'Ars Poetiqah* brought about recognition by the Establishment, and their poems continue to appear in literary magazines and reviews. As suggested by Shakargi, the Internet has brought the poems to larger audiences, thus facilitating crowd funding for publication. Since 2017, Keissar's poems have been taught in high schools as well as at colleges and universities, although, perhaps ironically, mainly in sociology departments.

Mizrahi poets who migrated as children and those born in Israel share images and literary figures. However, while the forefathers had to carve their own "third option" out of poetics (as the title of Alon's book), the younger generation seems to be freer of poetic restrictions (e.g., rhyming). They are more concerned with content than with form, telling a story that can be read aloud, with frequent intertextual references to high culture as well as to popular culture. Every reading of poems is a performance intended to raise emotions and consciousness about the state of marginal groups within Israeli society.

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[53] Benarroch, *The road's cut*, 52-55.

[54] Roy Hasan, *Zahav arayot* [Lion's gold], (Tangier Publication, 2016), 47-9.

[55] Hasan uses the Hebrew colloquial phrase, *ani met 'al ele* … [I am dying for those…]

An Emergent We? Concluding Remarks

The struggle to find one's place in the literary Israeli scene is described here from the point of view of Mizrahi poets; but poets of other ethnicities are also struggling to fit in. Ilan Berkovitz, in his long poem, *Hameshorer Ha-Ashkenazi Ha-Aharon* [The last Ashkenazi poet][56] brings the Russians into the ring. In the opening stanza he tells of the last Ashkenazi poet who buys food in the Russian deli, and then adds:

> Nobody speaks about the Russians, / [Russian curse], so they talk to each / other in a language of Cyrillic letters so that / the Mizrahim and Ashkenazim/ the locals will not understand.

The struggle of contemporary Russian poets is relevant to our discussion - Rita Kogan[57] speaks of similar experiences - called names, slurs, rejected by other kids in schools, coerced to give up cultural symbols. "For you we are a Russian circus," she writes in *'atzey ashuah lo* [Christmas trees don't]. She too mixes the past with the contemporary, *hutz laaretz* and Israel, ending the poem with a hybrid image – "we all dance the Horah / to the sound of Pussy Riot."[58]

The poems presented here start with the first person pronoun, expressing the personal happy or painful memories of the poets, or else proceed in belligerent and aggressive tones; they frequently end in an inclusive "we." It is not only Someck in *Shir Patriyoti* that sees all ethnic Israelis as fighting Don Quixote wars with rusted lances, but also Berkovitz who sees both Mizrahim and Ashkenazim threatened by the newcomers, the Russian speakers.

The intertextuality and popoetics are evident in the mixing of cultural concepts from Israel as well as from the diasporic world, dipped in nostalgia. It is as if Zohara Alfassiya sings with Pussy Riots and Bialik becomes one of us, a *hawaja* [male honorific, used throughout the Middle East]. This pastiche suggests a rejection of the "melting pot" metaphor replacing it with "the salad bowl" where each part keeps its shape and aroma, while combining with others to create

[56] Published in the literary supplement to the daily *Haaretz*, April 14, 2015. This is also the title of his latest poetry book, Pardes Publishing, 2016.
[57] Kogan was born in St. Petersburg (Leningrad at the time) in 1976 and came to Israel in 1990. The poems here are from her collection *Sus behatzait* [A horse in a skirt], ('Iton 77 Books, 2018).
[58] Pussy Riots are a Russian female anti-establishment rock group, whose members spent time in jail for their activities.

something different. Perhaps a common hybrid "we," with enough space and recognition for each ethnic group.

In this light, the playing field in Someck's "Rihal Madrid" can be interpreted as a metaphor for Israel and the rolling ball is its emerging culture as it continues to waver between East and West.

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