"My Arabic Is Mute": The Demise of Arabic Literature by Iraqi Jews and Their Shift to Writing in Hebrew

By Reuven Snir

Abstract

We are currently witnessing the demise of Arab-Jewish culture - a tradition that started more than fifteen hundred years ago is vanishing before our eyes. Until the twentieth century, the great majority of the Jews under the rule of Islam used Arabic as their language but after the establishment of the State of Israel, Arabic has been gradually disappearing as a language mastered by Jews. They have been deliberately excluded from Arabism to the point that we can now assume an unspoken agreement between Zionism and Arab nationalism to carry out a total cleansing of Arab-Jewish culture. The present article focuses on Iraqi-Jewish authors who immigrated to Israel during the 1950s and examines their insistence on continuing their Arabic literary tradition, despite the reluctance of the two clashing national movements to keep Arab-Jewish culture and identity alive. These attempts failed and gradually most of them stopped writing in Arabic—only few of them successfully shifted to writing in Hebrew, generally adopting the Zionist master narrative.

Immigration and Adaptation

Clash of Narratives

The Shift to Hebrew

Shimon Ballas: "I am an Arab Jew"

Sammy Michael: "I Activated a Forgetting Mechanism"

Elī 'Amīr: "To Speak the Other's Language Without Renouncing his Own"

*Almog Behar: "*Anā min al-Yahūd*"*

Conclusion

Arabic literature has included Jewish authors, mainly poets, since the pre-Islamic period. From the 11th to the 13th century in Muslim Spain (Al-Andalus), for instance, we find many Jewish poets fluent in *fuṣḥā* (standard literary Arabic), who achieved wide recognition for their literary works.[1] After the mid-13th century, Jews were nowhere as open to participation in the wider Arabic culture, and at home in *fuṣḥā*, as during the 1920s and 30s in Iraq.[2] This cultural involvement was encouraged by the process of modernization and secularization of Iraqi Jews since the second half of the nineteenth century. However, because of the escalation of the Arab-Jewish conflict over Palestine during the late 1940s, the Arab identity of the Jews, which had been firmly consolidated during the 1920s and 1930s, underwent a speedy fragmentation in a way that left Jews no alternative but to immigrate to Israel.

Since the 1950s Arab-Jews have been gradually but deliberately excluded from Arabness to the point that we can now speak of an unspoken agreement between Zionism and Arab nationalism to carry out a total cleansing of Arab-Jewish culture. The national struggle over Palestine has by no means prevented the two movements from seeing eye to eye in this respect, despite the difference between them—the one inspired by European colonialism and the other, an anti-colonial venture. Both movements have excluded the hybrid Arab-Jewish identity and highlighted instead a "pure" Jewish-Zionist identity against a "pure" Muslim-Arab one. We are in fact witnessing the demise of Arab-Jewish culture—a tradition that started more than fifteen hundred years ago is vanishing before our own eyes. Until the twentieth century, the great majority of the Jews under the

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[1] See Samuel Miklos Stern, "Arabic Poems by Spanish-Hebrew Poets," in *Romanica et Occidentalia Etudes dédiées à la mémoire de Hiram Peri*, ed. Moshé Lazar (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1963), 254-263.

[2] On the historical background of the Jews in Iraq, see Nissim Rejwan, *The Jews of Iraq, 3000 Years of History and Culture* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1985).

rule of Islam used Arabic as their language; now Arabic is gradually disappearing as a language mastered by Jews.[3]

The present article examines the persistent attempts by Iraqi-Jews who migrated to Israel during the 1950s to continue their Arabic literary activities despite the reluctance of the two clashing national movements to keep Arab-Jewish culture and identity alive. These attempts failed and gradually most of them stopped writing in Arabic—only few of them successfully shifted to writing in Hebrew, mainly in the field of fiction.

Immigration and Adaptation

Toward the end of the 1940s and the early 1950s, largely in the framework of the mass immigration of Iraqi Jews, many talented writers and poets emigrated from Iraq to Israel: Murād Mīkhā'īl (1906-1986), Shalom Darwīsh (1913-1997), Ya'qūb Balbūl (1920-2003), Nuriel Zilkha (1924-2015), Ibrāhīm Obadyā (1924-2006), Sammy Michael (b. 1926), Aharon Zakkai (1927-2021), Isḥāq Bār-Moshe (1927-2003), Nīr Shoḥet (1928-2011), Shlomo Zamir (1929-2017), Shimon Ballas (1930-2019), Salīm Sha'shū'a (1930-2013), Sālim al-Kātib (b. 1931), Najīb Kaḥīla (b. 1931), Shmuel Moreh (1932-2017), David Semah (1933-1997), Sasson Somekh (1933-2019), and Samīr Naqqāsh (1938-2004). The harsh living conditions in the new Jewish state, the difficulties of adapting to a new society and culture and the lack of knowledge of Hebrew took their toll on most of them. They underwent an "experience of shock and uprooting," as the aforementioned poet and scholar Sasson Somekh says, and under these conditions "it became difficult to think about literature."[4] Nevertheless, the fact that they arrived in a state where Arabic was considered at the time an official language next to Hebrew, gave them, at least at the beginning, the hope that they would be able to continue their literary careers in Arabic.

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[3] On the demise of Arab-Jewish culture, see Reuven Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature: The Birth and Demise of the Arabic Short Story* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

[4] *'Iton 77*, January-February 1988, 32.

Following the Palestinian *Nakba* (literally "disaster," or "catastrophe") during the 1948 war, more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs—about half of prewar Palestine's Arab population—fled or were expelled from their homes. The greater part of the Palestinian Arab urban intelligentsia abandoned the territories of Palestine, while those who remained inside the boundaries of the State of Israel were generally from the poorer or the uneducated village population. This cultural vacuum was partially filled by the immigrating Jewish poets and writers, especially those from Iraq. And indeed, not a few of these authors continued to write and publish in Arabic, while adhering to the poetics they had grown accustomed to in Iraq, which was suffused with English and French influences.[5] A significant thematic change appeared in their literary work: alongside the conventional subjects which had preoccupied them in Iraq – love, social and ethical problems, the status of women, fate and its illusions, death and thoughts on life – topics touching on the pressing social and political circumstances of the new society became frequent in their work. It was precisely its preoccupation with urgent socio-political issues and questions related to the tense relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab-Palestinian minority which gave importance, however limited, to Jewish writing in Arabic during these years.

Although Israeli patriotism quickly permeated the writing of most immigrant authors, emigration to a new society did not bring a change in their fundamental world view. Characterizing the writings of the authors who immigrated to Israel as opposed to those who remained in Iraq, the aforementioned poet and scholar Shmuel Moreh argues that the Iraqi-Jewish immigrants wrote poems full of national pride for Israel and her achievements. Whereas in Iraq their poetry was "marked by melancholy, in Israel it became optimistic and throbbing with the emotion of being a part of the people and state." In contrast, according to Moreh, the poetry of those who remained in Iraq "became more melancholic and pessimistic, and contained complaints on the vicissitudes of the time, on the dispersion of friends and on their fears and suspicions."[6] This generalization,

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[5] See Reuven Snir, '*Arviyyūt, Yahadūt, Tsiyonūt: Ma'avak Zehūyot ba-Yetsira shel Yehūde 'Iraq* (Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism: A Clash of Identities in the Literature of Iraqi Jews) (Jerusalem: The Ben-Zvi Institute, 2005), 247-308.

[6] Shmuel Moreh, *al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣīra 'Inda Yahūd al-'Irāq* (Short Stories by Jewish Writers from

however, is misleading and seems to be only derive from the wretched ends in the 1970s of the authors who had not immigrated to Israel during the 1950s.

Following the efforts of the ruling Israeli Ashkenazi establishment to paint Jewish immigration from the Arab world in Zionist colors,[7] Arab-Jewish intellectuals had to cope with the new situation with split personalities. Many hastened to present themselves as Zionists while referring to their Arab identity as a mark of disgrace. They underwent a process of growing identification with the Zionist state, largely a result of the change in their status as a Jewish majority in Israeli-Hebrew society, the reverse of their status in Iraq as a minority within an Arab-Muslim majority. Having internalized the negative attitude of the canonical cultural center toward Arab culture, the immigrating authors learned to reject their own roots in order to get closer to the heart of the Israeli Zionist collective. The negative impact of all this on the youth growing up in Arab-Jewish families immigrating to Israel from various Arab countries was very apparent. Trying to conform to the Sabra (a native-born Israeli Jew) norm, children were made to feel ashamed of their parents' Arabness. In his autobiographical story, "Pictures from the Elementary School,"[8] the Syrian born writer Amnon Shamosh (b. 1929) confesses that as a child he forbade his mother to speak Arabic in public. "For our parents," the Moroccan born poet Sami Shalom Chetrit (b. 1960) says, "all of us were agents of repression."[9] Iraqi born Yehuda Shenhav (b. 1952), a Tel Aviv University professor and one of the prominent activists of *Ha-Keshet Ha-Demokratit Ha-Mizrahit* (The Oriental Democratic Spectrum),[10] described his own experience in this role:

Iraq) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), 23.

[7] An example is the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center in Or-Yehuda (BJHC) founded in 1972; its museum opened 16 years later and has adopted the memorialization practices used in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Israel's national Holocaust memorial; see Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, "Our Dowry: Identity and Memory Among Iraqi Immigrants in Israel," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 2 (2002): 165-186.

[8] Amnon Shamosh, *Kane ve-Kinnamon* (Calamus and Cinnamon) (Ramat-Gan: Massada, 1979), 79-87.

[9] *Yediot Ahronoth, 7 Days*, 8 August 2003, 54.

[10] On this movement, see Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Ha-Ma'avak ha-Mizraḥī be-Yisra'el: Bein Dikuy le-Shiḥrūr, Bein Hizdahūt le-Alternativa, 1948-2003* (The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel: Between Oppression and Liberation, and Between Identification and Alternative, 1948-2003) (Tel-Aviv:

> On the first Thursday of every month, the Egyptian singer Um Kulthum (1903-1975) would begin to sing and I would begin to tense up. As the Oriental tones filled the house my mother would gradually make the radio louder and louder and I would not know where to bury myself. I would try to turn the radio off and she would turn it back on and make it even louder. I had become a foreign agent in my own house.[11]

In the documentary film *Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs: The Iraqi Connection*,[12] the Iraqi-Jewish scholar Ella Shohat (b. 1959) describes how "when I went to kindergarten in Israel, I was aware that Arabic words sometimes slipped in when I spoke. I was ashamed." Among the immigrants who continued to write in Arabic, it was soon possible to discern two groups, generally operating in parallel with the dominant cultural trends among the local Arab-Palestinian minority at the time: on the one side, we can find the authors who preferred to be active under the aegis of the Ashkenazi establishment and, on the other side, the writers who joined the Communist Party or expressed sympathy for it.

The Histadrūt, the Israeli General Workers' Federation, played an important role in encouraging and cultivating what was called "positive" culture within the Arab-Palestinian minority through literary prizes and competitions, as well as the founding of the Arab Book Fund.[13] Those literary and cultural activities satisfied the yearning for peace and "Arab-Jewish brotherhood,"[14] but avoided dealing

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Am Oved, 2004), 290-295.

[11] From a lecture at the School for Peace Neve Shalom / Wāḥat al-Salām, Israel, March 2000; *School for Peace Annual Review 1999 — 2001*, January, 2001. For Shenhav's views, see Yehuda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

[12] A film directed by an Iraqi Shiite exile filmmaker, Samir Jamāl al-Dīn (b. 1955), and produced by Dschoint Ventschr (Zurich, 2002).

[13] See, for example, Eliyahu Agassi, ed., *Fī Mahrajān al-Adab* (In the Festival of Literature) (Tel-Aviv: Maṭba'at Davar, 1959). The book was published by the Arab Book Fund and contained works that had earned prizes in a literary competition by the Histadrūt in 1958. The introduction to the book by its editor, Eliyahu Aggassi (Iliyāhū Aghāsī, 1909-1991), is a good illustration of the efforts to produce "positive" culture.

[14] While in Iraq Arab cultural and national identity encompassed Jews side by side with Muslims and Christians; in Israel, since the 1950s, Jewish identity has become in itself a cultural and national

with controversial problems such as the government's policy toward the Arab-Palestinian minority and the way immigrating Jews from Arab lands were absorbed into Israeli society. Consequently, the works produced by these immigrants tended to emphasize more traditional themes such as male-female relations, social and ethical problems, the status of women, fate and its illusions, and universal questions of existence.

In the opposing camp stood the leftist Jewish writers who joined the local Communist party, which included Palestinian intellectuals who had not abandoned Israel following its establishment in 1948. The ban on Communist writers, Jews and Arabs, led the government-sponsored "Association of Arabic Language Poets" to refuse to collaborate with them.[15] The journals of both camps were fiercely competitive, but the Communist journals stood out, particularly *al-Ittiḥād* (The Union), established in 1944, and *al-Jadīd* (The New), founded in 1953, for their quality and wide circulation. They did not hesitate to deal with topics considered taboo by the governmental press, which the Arab public perceived as the trumpet of the ruling party, and an outlet of hatred against Arabs. In contrast to those writers who were supported by the establishment, a preoccupation with political and social problems was dominant in the writing of Communist authors. Besides this thematic difference, it was possible to discern, in their writing, also a significant poetic difference: while those writers close to the establishment in general clung closely to traditional Arabic poetics, in the early 1950s the Communists poets were already looking toward the modernism of *al-shi'r al-ḥurr* (free verse), despite the fact that this new poetics had hardly been used by the Palestinian Arab poets in Israel. The Jewish poets had already absorbed this new form of poetry in Iraq, where it had first flourished and was identified with Communist writers.[16]

identity. Thus, because of the political conflict, the natural Iraqi hybrid Arab-Jewish identity turned into a sharp dichotomy of Jewish versus Arab.

[15] See *al-Jadīd*, December 1955, 40-43.

[16] On this modernist poetics, see Reuven Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature: A Theoretical Framework* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 199-205.

All the Jewish writers in Arabic in the 1950s preached coexistence, peace, and brotherhood out of a belief that these ideals would soon be made real in the developing young state. But while this belief arose among the writers sponsored by the governmental establishment in the wake of the Jews' decisive victory in the struggle for control of the land, among Jewish leftist writers it emerged out of a sense of sympathy with the defeated side. The Palestinian leaders of the Communist party preferred to emphasize the obligations of Arabic literature in Israel to "carry the banner of Jewish-Arab brotherhood," in the words of Palestinian author Emil Ḥabībī (1921-1996). They stressed Jewish-Arab cooperation in times past, in the present and in the future, and they also praised the contribution of Jewish writers to this enterprise. This contribution, and especially that of the Communists among them, was however very important because it stimulated Arab literary culture in Israel thematically and poetically, and because it was a cry for a just co-existence which sprang from the throats of only a few among the Jewish majority. It also signaled to the Arab-Palestinian minority, and in its own language, that not all the Jews were at peace with the injustice caused to the Palestinians.

On both sides, the sharp, black-versus-white dichotomy was striking. For those who were sponsored by the governmental Ashkenazi establishment, this dichotomy had a nationalist character; it contrasted the dark past of a minority degraded in exile with the joyous present of Jewish independence in the new homeland. For the Communists authors, the dichotomy was social and universal, between a dark present filled with oppression and a utopian future ruled by justice. The difference between these world-views may be seen in the concept of "spring" so frequently used by both camps. According to the writers supported by the Ashkenazi establishment, their hopes had been realized in the Jewish, independent Israel of the 1950s, as we see in the first two words of Salīm Shaʿshūʿa's first poem in his collection *Fī ʿĀlam al-Nūr* (In the World of Light, 1959), "The spring has arrived."[17] In contrast, for the Communist writers the struggle was still in full force, and their eyes gazed toward the future, "Till Spring Comes," as in the

[17] Salīm Shaʿshūʿa, *Fī ʿĀlam al-Nūr* (In the World of Light) (Nazareth: Maṭbaʿat al-Ḥakīm, 1959), 9.

title of David Semah's poetry collection *Ḥattā Yajī' al-Rabī'* (Till Spring Comes, 1959).[18]

Clash of Narratives

The works of the writers and poets sponsored by the Ashkenazi establishment was steeped in national pride and permeated with Zionist patriotism and the desire for peace, while avoiding any critique of the governments' social and political ideologies. One prominent figure among them was the aforementioned poet and jurist Salīm Sha'shū'a, whose previously mentioned volume of poetry *Fī 'Ālam al-Nūr* (In the World of Light, 1959) well represents these writers. The book's title reflects the ideological orientation of the poems, which praise the exodus from the darkness of Iraqi exile to the light of redemption in Israel while underscoring the dichotomy between the wretchedness of the past and the joyous life of the present. The author provides no critique, not even allusive, or any protest against the social, economic or political conditions in the new State of Israel. Despite the tormented absorption of the new Jewish immigrants and the severe problems of the local Palestinian minority, the poet depicts an idyllic picture of a paradise on earth. This gave the book's critics their pretext for a scathing critique.[19] The poet's national patriotism is expressed also in the dedication of the volume to the then President of the State of Israel, Yitzḥak Ben Zvi (1884-1963), whose picture appears above the following verses:

من لآلي الشّعر يا مولاي قد صنعت عقودا
وبها رصّعت تأريخا طريفا وتليدا
فإذا قدّمتها اليوم لمولاي نشيدا
فهي فيض من شعوري خطّه الحبّ قصيدا

> From the pearls of my poetry, your exalted glory, I made these verses,
> And interwove them with stories of the heritage of fathers and sons.
> Now I present them to you today as a hymn to your honor,

[18] David Semah, *Ḥattā Yajī' al-Rabī'* (Till Spring Comes) (Tel Aviv: al-Maṭba'a al-Ḥadītha, 1959).
[19] See, for example, *al-Jadīd*, July 1958, 23-24.

Behold the bounty of my feeling, transformed to poetry by love.

In this, Sha'shū'a conforms to the customs of the medieval Arab court poets, who glorified and praised their patrons. The poet also wrote a high-flown, cliche-filled introduction to the volume in which he conveys how he felt the rush of History's wings above his head. As there is no better way to characterize this type of contemporary writing sponsored by the Ashkenazi establishment, it is important to quote it in full in the original:

أخي القارئ الكريم!
في هذه البلاد حيث تكّد الأيدي، وتجّد العقول، وتتفتّق الأذهان، في هذه البلاد حيث تنبثق الفكر كالأشّعة، فتتألّق الخواطر كالأهّلة، وتسمق شجرة المعرفة، وتعبق الحكمة، وتنطلق الرّوحانيّة. يلتقي الشّرق بالغرب، فتتجسّم الفكرة بالصّورة، ويخترع الغرب ويبتدع الشّرق، دنيا جديدة شيّقة. ويطلع فجر وتشرق شمس وتتدفّق أضواء في عالم النّور. في هذه الدّنيا حيث ترتفع المصانع، وتصطخبا لمعامل، ويتصاعد الدّخان وتفوح البخور. في هذه الدّنيا الجديدة، والحدائق الغنّ الّتي كانت قبل عقد من الزّمن، صحارى قاحلة، يقف الإنسان اليوم معجبا بأخيه الإنسان. الإنسان الّذي حيث الجنائن الغلب يزرع. الإنسان الّذي يبني. الإنسان الّذي يفّكر. هذا الإنسان الّذي لم تعقه الطّبيعة دون الّذي يريده، تجده هنا في إسرائيل يعمل وينتج، حيث يخلق القلم وتتفنّن الرّيشة ويبدع الإزميل! وقفت أنصت وملء عينيّ هذا الجمال، في البطاح، في الرّوابي وفي الوديان. جمال الأرض الطّيبة! وجمال الأيدي المنتجة! وجمال العقول المبدعة! هذا الجمال أحسّه كلّما تأّمّلت وحيثما تملّيت، فلا عجب إذا أستلهمه قصائدي مختارا أو غير مختار، قصائد كتبتها في عالم النّور، وأنا أسير في قافلة الأخوّة العربيّة اليهوديّة المناضلة من أجل السّلام والمحّبة بين شعبينا العربيّ والعبريّ السّاميين. هذه القصائد بين يديك، لعلّك أن تجد فيها ما تقرأه وما تعجبه وما يحبّب لك هذه الأخوّة الّتي تنبثق من ربوع إسرائيل. وغايتي — كّل غايتي — أن نكتسح — أنا وأنت — الأشواك الّتي قد تقف في طريق أخوّتنا المسالمة، لنعيش معا في عالم النّور.

My brother the Reader!
In this land in which hands labor, brains strive and thoughts grow weary. In this land, in which ideas are distinguished like rays of the sun and thoughts sparkle like moons, the tree of Knowledge blooms, Wisdom spreads her pleasant scents and spirituality bursts forth, East meets West and the Idea crystallizes in Form. The West discovers and the East invents a new and astounding world. The dawn rises, the sun shines and its rays break forth in a world of light. In this new world, in which gardens are

> overgrown and orchards bloom, where ten years ago was arid desert, Man stands today and reveres his fellow Man. Man who sows, Man who builds, Man who thinks, this Man before whom Nature is no obstacle to the realization of his desires. Here you will find us working and creating in Israel, where the Pen creates, the paintbrush is productive and the scalpel (of the sculptor) makes wonders! I stood and hearkened, my eyes full of this beauty, the plains, the hills and the valleys. The beauty of the good earth! The beauty of hands which create! The beauty of brains which invent! I sense this beauty at every moment and in every place I look and in it I take pleasure. It is no wonder, then, that here, willingly or unwillingly, I have sought my inspiration for my poems—these very poems which I have written in the world of light, while I walk in the columns of that Arab-Jewish brotherhood which strives for peace and love between our two peoples under Hebrew and Arab skies. Perhaps you will find something pleasing among these poems placed before you to endear to you that noble brotherhood which spreads across Israel. I hopefully await the day when you and I shall triumph over the thorns which may perhaps stand in the path of our brotherhood and pursuit of peace, so that we may live together in a world of light.[20]

Beautiful words on the meeting of East and West, the flowering of the desert, the blossoming of the new state, Jewish-Arab brotherhood and the yearning for peace, all the while absolutely ignoring the severe problems of contemporary Israeli society. Shaʿshūʿa is happy with just a vague reference to the thorns which "may perhaps [*sic!*] stand in the path of our brotherhood and pursuit of peace."

The emigrating leftist poets and writers did not agree with the position that Israeli patriotism implied absolute support for the Israeli authorities even if they were aware that their views might harm their chances of integration into Israeli society as well as their livelihoods.[21] The Jewish Communist writers arrived in Israel with an ideology already formed—in Iraq, as in other Middle Eastern states, Jewish

[20] Shaʿshūʿa, *Fī ʿĀlam al-Nūr*, 7-8.

[21] See *al-Jadīd*, December 1955, 26-34.

intellectuals after the Second World War inclined to either Communism or Zionism. With the outbreak of the war, the Communist underground in Iraq grew stronger, and Jews joined it "out of feelings of Iraqi patriotism"[22] and the belief that Communism was the only force capable of withstanding Nazism. "From a small, childish, one-dimensional framework," as described by Sammy Michael, this movement grew in strength to "a tidal wave."[23] The underground fought for equal rights for all minorities and against the corrupt, dictatorial Iraqi regime, but also against Zionism. In 1946 several of its Jewish members founded the magazine *al-ʿUṣba* (The League), based in Baghdad, the official bulletin of the Iraqi ʿUṣbat Mukāfaḥat al-Ṣihyūniyya (The League for the Struggle against Zionism). Opposition to Zionism was by no means exclusive to Communist Jews, on the contrary, it included the Jewish community institutions and their leaders, as shown by an anti-Zionist telegram to the League of Nations sent by the general council of the Iraqi Jewish community.[24] It is nonetheless possible that there were also some, particularly among the youth, who saw no real contradiction between Zionism and Communism as liberation movements fighting against British occupation.[25]

Their immigration to Israel did not chill Iraqi-Jewish Communist writers' enthusiasm for this ideology. They were inspired by the deeds and words of the Jewish leaders of the Iraqi Communist party, such as Sasson Dallal (1929-1949),

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[22] See David Semah's letter in *Maariv*, 26 January 1989.

[23] *Ba-Maḥane*, March 22, 1989, 23. According to Iraqi criminal files, 245 Jews joined the Communist Party in the 1940s. Most of them were from Baghdad, and the great majority joined the party in 1946. Quite a few were still students, some of whom were female; see Fāḍil al-Barāk, *al-Madāris al-Yahūdiyya wa-l-Īrāniyya fī al-ʿIrāq* (Jewish and Iranian Schools in Iraq) (Baghdad: al-Dār al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 245-252. On Jewish Communist activity in Iraq, see Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 650-651, 699-701, 1190-1192; Abbas Shiblak, *The Lure of Zion*: *The Case of the Iraqi Jews* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1986), 59; Abbas Shiblak, *Iraqi Jews*: *A History of Mass Exodus* (London: Saqi, 2005), 80; Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 141-182; and Aline Schlaepfer, *Les intellectuels juifs de Bagdad (1908-1951)* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[24] According to Shalom Darwīsh, who composed the telegram see Zvi Yehuda, ed., *Mi-Bavel li-Yrushalayim* (From Babylon to Jerusalem) (Tel-Aviv: Iraqi Jews' Traditional Cultural Center, 1980), 82-85.

[25] Conversations with David Semah, Haifa, May 2, 6 and June 14, 1989.

who wrote the following passage in a letter to his brother David, the night before his execution in an Iraqi prison, together with ten others of his comrades:

> A wave of terror has taken the country; thousands of people are being arrested, tortured and executed. I am not the only one to die tomorrow. There are ten others with me. The people as a whole are persecuted. Life in our country recalls the days when the forces of fascism were marching on murdering thousands of innocent people. [...] The forces of reaction cannot rule forever. They have been defeated before by the will of the people and by the same will, they will be defeated in the near future. I am dying tomorrow because I have faith in mankind to master their destiny, which is democracy, peace, and the perfect life. The forces of reaction that are still murdering people to lengthen the time of their criminal rule are afraid of the future. [...] They can rob me of my life, but they cannot change my thinking, which is that of all Mankind. I am free because I know the truth and neither prison nor execution can take away that freedom from me. Tomorrow at dawn I shall die. Yes, they can end my life and stop me from exposing and fighting them, but with my death, thousands of others will rise against them. We are many, they are the few. Do not grieve for me, dear brother, instead carry my memory with you and perpetuate the fight, which will glorify the future of all humanity.[26]

In contrast to the ones supported by the Ashkenazi establishment, these writers and poets devoted all their literary energies to an intellectual public struggle, focusing their attention on three central concerns: the manner in which new Jewish immigrants were absorbed; the inequality between Oriental Jews and Ashkenazi residents; and the fate of the Arab-Palestinian minority. Their work was a highly sensitive seismic sensor of the Arab minority's sentiment, and occasionally an expression of its collective conscience in the shadow of the military administration's restrictions and political censorship. Thus, for instance, David Semah's poem "Sawfa Ya'ūdu" ("He Shall Return") was one of the first to be written about the massacre of scores of innocent men and women at Kafr Qasim

[26] See http://www.dangoor.com/71page39.html (accessed on February 22, 2021).

on October 29, 1956.[27] As in the famous Hebrew poem by Saul Tchernichovsky (1898-1943), "The Rabbi's Daughter and Her Mother,"[28] the poet chose to represent the tragic events in the form of a dialogue between a mother and her daughter about the killing of their husband and father. The girl does not understand why her father has not returned:

لقد كدت أنساه! ما لونه
أتلمع من لهفة عينه؟
أراح يحلّق فوق الغيوم
ويبحث عن ساطعات النّجوم
لينظم عقدا يطوّق جيدي
ويهديه لي يوم عيدي!

I have nearly forgotten him! What is the color of his face?
Are his eyes sparkling with longing?
Has he gone to fly above the clouds,
Seeking sparkling stars,
To string around my neck like a necklace of pearls
A birthday gift?

The mother calms the daughter with the promise of the father's return, rose bouquet in hand, forever. Not only shall he return, but he will also bring a bit of money to rescue the wretched family. The poet ties the national woes of the Palestinian minority to its social and economic woes, as the death of the family patriarch, caused only by his being a Palestinian, has brought the family to the threshold of hunger and caused a deterioration in the health of the ailing daughter. Slowly, the mother's display of certainty of the father's return, for the benefit of her daughter, is undermined. It becomes clear that he was killed after leaving for

[27] The poem was completed, according to Semah, approximately two weeks after the massacre. The poem was published for the first time in *al-Ittiḥād*, December 31, 1956 and was later included with slight revisions in Semah's collection (41-45). In January 1957, *al-Jadīd* published several literary reactions to the massacre, among them a poem by the Palestinian poet Tawfīq Zayyād (1932-1994), which he claimed to have written on November 3, 1956.

[28] Saul Tchernichovski, *Shīrīm* (Poems) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1950), 736-737. Semah was then very fond of his poetry, much more than he was of Hayyim Nahman Bialik's (1873-1934) (conversations with Semah, May 2, and June 6 and 14, 1989).

work without a permit, an allusion to the restrictions endured by the Palestinian population in Israel during the 1950s. The daughter herself, who becomes aware of the circumstances of his death from the whispers of the neighbors' children, is stunned by the knowledge that her father "will never return." To calm her, the mother confronts her with the certainty of future redemption, and the vision of a sweeping revolution:

تقرّب يوم الصّراع
فقد هبّت العاصفة
على الكون حانقة جارفة
تطوّح بالظّلم والظّالمين
وبالسّارقين طعام الجياع
وبالسّجن تذهب والسّاجن
وبالسّالبين حليب الرّضاع
وبالسّافكين الدّماء
لتنقذ أطماعهم من ضياع
فشدّوا القوى أيّها الكادحون
فليس لكم ما تخسرون

The day of the final struggle is near
The storm already blows
Over the world, raging and sweeping
Striking oppression and oppressors
Those who steal the bread of the hungry
The prison and the prisoners
Those who steal milk from babies
Those who spill blood
To save their lust from oblivion
Gather courage! O you are the workers
You have nothing to lose.

The revolution seen by the mother in her vision will bring a total change of the existing order, and is described in standard Communist terminology: the masses, the workers, the red flag, the struggle against social oppression, the crushing of oppressors and shedders of blood, and the call to the proletariat, who "have

nothing to lose," to storm the old regime. The allusion is to the concluding words of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Communist Manifesto*: "The proletariat has nothing to lose but its chains."[29] A new era will follow the removal of oppression and injustice:

وإذ ذاك سوف يعود
أب وصديق ودود
وحتّى أبوك، عساه يعود
وفي كفّه باقة من ورود
تضمّخ أنفاسنا بالعطور

And then they will return again,
Father and beloved friend
Even your father might return
A bouquet of roses in his hand
To anoint our souls with fragrance.

The worldview presented in this poem is based on a clear dualism between the oppressive rulers and the oppressed masses, the belief that social justice is a necessary condition for peace among peoples, and the hope in a better tomorrow. This is also expressed in a poem that Semah dedicated to the Palestinian Communist poet and political leader Tawfīq Zayyād (1932-1994), which is addressed to "my brother, Tawfīq":[30]

لنـــا وطـن لشعبينـا سمـاه وأرضه والنّسائم والزّهور
إذا حصدوا جماجم في ثراه فإنّ حصـــادنا أمـل ونـور

We have a homeland—its skies and earth
And winds and flowers belong to both our peoples,

[29] Somekh concluded one of his poems in memory of the October Revolution with similar words (*al-Jadīd*, November, 1959, 48-49).

[30] Semah recited this poem in the festival of poetry held in Acre on 11 July 1958, when Zayyād was in prison. It was later published in *al-Jadīd*, July 1958, 39-40, and portions of it were incorporated in Semah's above-mentioned collection (55-57).

If they reap skulls in its dust,[31]
Then our harvest is hope and light.

Semah's poem about the massacre at Kafr Qasim, no lesser in poetic and tragic affect than those written by the best Palestinian poets,[32] represents one facet of the literary activism of the leftist Jewish writers: an immediate reaction of protest, chiefly in poetry, to what struck them as injustice toward the Arab-Palestinian minority.

Even the passage of time would not let the Communist Jewish authors forget how a new culture and new values were imposed on them while their pasts were derided,[33] and in this context their Communist Party activities were a way to change their condition. Later, this sense of insult was expressed even by those who did not hold leftist views—social protest about relations within Jewish society, would come to more prominent expression in the Hebrew works, especially novels, of writers of a later period, both Arab Jews and others. Against such a background the issue of the written language used by Iraqi-Jewish authors—their mother tongue, Arabic, or the language of the new Israeli society, Hebrew—became a cardinal cultural dilemma.

The Shift to Hebrew

Unlike local Palestinian poets and writers, most of the Iraqi-Jewish writers who immigrated to Israel became familiar with Hebrew literature without relinquishing their attachment to Arabic culture. Sooner or later, they were confronted with the stark choice of which language to write in, that is, whether to adapt to their new cultural surroundings and make the required and conscious shift in their aesthetic preferences in the hope of finding a new audience, or

[31] An allusion to Zayyād's poem "The Harvest of Skulls," about the massacre at Kafr Qasim (*al-Jadīd*, January 1957, 25-30).

[32] Cf. for example, the poems of the Palestinian poet Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941-2008) on this event *Dīwān* (Acre: Dār al-Aswār, 1988), 207-220.

[33] See *Maariv*, April 25, 1989, B9.

whether to continue to write in Arabic, their beloved mother tongue. Unlike traditional Hebrew literary writing by Arab Jews such as Sulaymān Menaḥem Mānī (1850-1924), who published a story on Sephardic life in Palestine,[34] such literary writing based on the new poetics of Hebrew literature emerged only in Israel. During the 1950s Nīr Shohet (1928-2011) started publishing short stories in Hebrew; Aharon Zakkai (1927-2021) published his first poetry collection *El Ḥofo shel Ra'ayon* (To the Edge of an Idea, 1957); and Shelomo Zamīr (1929-2017) published *Ha-Kol mi-Ba'ad la-'Anaf* (The Voice through the Branch, 1960), which earned him the Shlonsky Prize along with 'Amīr Gilboa (1917-1984) and Abba Kovner (1918-1987). In the following I will concentrate on three of the major fiction writers among the Iraqi-Jewish immigrants who shifted to writing in Hebrew, in addition to another young writer of Iraqi-Jewish origin born in Israel.[35]

Shimon Ballas: "I am an Arab Jew"

Shimon Ballas (1930-2019) is perhaps the only Arab-Jewish writer who has successfully shifted to writing in Hebrew while still trying (not always successfully) to adhere to Arabic cultural preferences: "I am an Arab Jew," said Ballas, "I write in Hebrew, and I belong here. This does not mean, however, that I have given up my cultural origins, and my cultural origins are Arab."[36] Born as "a Jew by chance," in his words, in al-Dahhāna, the Christian quarter of Baghdad, Ballas grew to adopt a secular cosmopolitan worldview. He was educated at the school of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), where he mastered Arabic and French, the latter serving as his window to world literature. He joined the Communist party as an Iraqi patriot when he was still a student and followed conditions in Israel by reading the European and American press, while serving as aide to Iraqi-

[34] See *Ha-Tsvi* I (1885), 31-34. Most Hebrew literature written in Iraq focused on religious matters (as did liturgical poetry). On the emergence of modern Hebrew literature in Iraq from 1735 to 1950, see Lev Hakak, *Nitsane ha-Yetsira ha-'Ivrīt be-Bavel* (The Budding of Modern Hebrew Creation in Babylon) (Or-Yehuda: The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center, 2003).

[35] On Mizrahi fiction in general, with a detailed bibliography, see Yochai Oppenheimer, *Mi-Rḥov Ben-Gurion to Shāri' al-Rashīd: 'Al Sipporet Mizraḥīt* (From Ben-Girion to Shāri' al-Rashīd: On Mizrahi Prose) (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2014).

[36] *New Outlook*, November-December, 1991, 30-32.

Jewish senator Ezra Ben Menaḥem Daniel (1874-1952). He attributes his membership in the Iraqi Communist Party, which he got when he was only sixteen,[37] to reading in French *The Iron Heel* (1907) by Jack London (1876-1916). Arabic literature, especially by Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān (1883-1931) and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973), proved to be his major inspiration. Besides publishing essays on movies and translating literary texts, he wrote short stories and even a detective novel—*al-Jarīma al-Ghāmiḍa* (The Mysterious Crime)—all of which he burned before immigrating to Israel in 1951, something he would later deeply regret.[38] His immigration was by no means motivated by any form of Zionist tendencies; it was "of necessity, not ideology," as until his death he was never a Zionist.[39] He had been selected for a scholarship to study at the Sorbonne, but this dream would materialize only twenty years later when Paris would become a second home for him.

In Israel, Ballas's experience in an immigrant transit camp (*ma'abara*), where he lived after his immigration, as well as his activities in the Communist Party, would inspire his literary production. He served for six years as editor of Arab Affairs for the party's Hebrew organ, *Kol ha-'Am* (The Voice of the People) and published Arabic short stories and essays under the pen name of Adīb al-Qāṣṣ (literally, "Adīb [Man of Letters] the storyteller").[40] In one of his early stories written in Israel, "Aḥabba al-Ḥayāt" (He Loved Life),[41] the protagonist faces a real danger of being deprived of his livelihood, but nevertheless does not surrender his ideological principles. In 1961, Ballas decided to leave the party and has since devoted himself to literary writing, academic research, and translation. His major scholarly study, on the Arab-Israeli conflict as reflected in Arabic literature, was based on his Ph.D. thesis written at the Sorbonne. It was published in French and later translated into Hebrew and Arabic. He also published an anthology of Palestinian stories (1970) in Hebrew translation, served as the Chair of the

[37] Ballas joined the party on December 6, 1946; see al-Barāk, *al-Madāris al-Yahūdiyya wa-l-Īrāniyya fī al-'Irāq*, 249.

[38] Personal conversation with Ballas (Haifa, April 4, 2001).

[39] *Maariv*, April 25, 1989, B9.

[40] Personal conversation with Ballas (Haifa, June 14, 1989). His novel *Ḥeder Na'ūl* (A Locked Room) (1980) describes the way of life among members of the Communist press in Israel.

[41] *Al-Jadīd*, December 1955, 26-34.

Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Haifa, and edited the academic Arabic-language journal *al-Karmil*: *Studies in Arabic Language and Literature*.

Returning to Ballas's literary work, in 1964 he published *Ha-Ma'abara* (The Immigrant Transit Camp), the first Hebrew novel to be written by an Iraqi émigré. The book was originally written in Arabic with the title *Mudhakkirāt Khādima* (Memories of a Maid) but Ballas decided not to publish it and to switch to writing in Hebrew.[42] Thus, he devoted himself to a thorough reading of the Bible and the Mishnah, the post-biblical collection and codification of Jewish oral laws, and later he concentrated on reading the writings of Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888-1970), Nobel Prize laureate and one of the central figures of modern Hebrew fiction, in addition to other prominent Hebrew literary works. At the same time, by moving from Arabic to Hebrew he felt forced to "unlearn" his Arabic and refashion his identity. Explaining his shift to Hebrew, he felt that by writing in Arabic he was facing a contradiction and was isolating himself from the society in which he was living and from his original beloved culture.

In fact, this is the main topic of his first novel, *Ha-Ma'abara*, which depicts the tragedy of the Arab-Jewish immigrants who were uprooted from their homes in the Arab world and reduced to poverty and living on insufficient resources. Ballas's approach was however to skirt the material deprivation and focus on the cultural impoverishment of those Arabized Jews, whose most esteemed moral and cultural values were rejected. Thrown into a hostile environment which felt contempt for their original culture, these Arabized Jews were labeled as exceptional, thus becoming victims of an organized and institutionalized process of adaptation to a culture in which their mother tongue, Arabic, was considered the language of the enemy and their original cultural assets were deemed inferior.[43] Surprisingly, the novel was very well received by literary critics, some of whom even praised the author as representing those Arabized Jews who had preserved Hebrew through the generations, even though Ballas, like most Iraqi immigrants,

[42] Personal conversation with Ballas (Haifa, June 14, 1989).

[43] *Ma'ariv*, April 25, 1989, B9.

had arrived in Israel knowing no Hebrew at all. It seems that the positive responses to the novel were, for the ruling Ashkenazi establishment, nothing more than a way out of a cognitive dissonance—a tool to preserve the cozy reassurance of its liberal and tolerant attitude toward the cultures of those on the margins.[44] Shortly after the publication of *Ha-Ma'abara* Ballas completed its sequel, *Tel-Aviv Mizraḥ* (Tel-Aviv East) but due to the patronizing and dismissive attitude of the literary Ashkenazi circles, its publication was delayed by some thirty years and was first published only in 1998. In 2003, Ballas published the trilogy *Tel-Aviv Mizraḥ* (Tel-Aviv East), which consisted of *Ha-Ma'abara* and *Tel-Aviv Mizraḥ*, in addition to the new installment, *Yalde Ḥuts* (The Outsiders), which describes the lives of the main characters until the murder of Prime Minister Yitzḥak Rabin in 1995.

Other works by Ballas also testify to his Arab cultural preferences despite his shift to writing in Hebrew. In *Ve-Hu Akher* (And He Is Other, 1991), he presents his views on the fate of Iraqi Jews who did not immigrate to Israel via the story of several non-Zionist intellectuals. One of them, to whom the title of the novel alludes, is Aḥmad Hārūn Sawsan, whose character is based on the figure of Aḥmad Nissīm Sūsa (1900-1982), an Iraqi Jewish intellectual who converted to Islam. The novel fictionalizes the life of Sūsa, who ended up writing works used in anti-Jewish propaganda by the regime of the late Iraqi president Ṣaddām Ḥusayn (1937-2006). It begins during the Iran-Iraq War of the mid-1980s, with the protagonist writing a memoir in which he tries to explain why he wrote his enormous work on the history of the Jews. What unfolds then is Sūsa's life story, the climatic event being his marriage to a non-Jewish American woman, Jane, while living in the United States during the 1930s as a visiting graduate student of engineering. The marriage results in Sawsan's elder brother and acting family patriarch, Daniel, disowning him and having him excommunicated from his hometown Jewish enclave at al-Ḥilla. That trauma sets off a chain of events that ruins Sawsan's marriage and makes for a too-pat justification for all of his subsequent actions. The title of the novel is based on a conversation between Sawsan and his friend, the poet As'ad

[44] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 1-31. On such cognitive dissonance, see Reuven Snir, "'Postcards in the Morning': Palestinians Writing in Hebrew," *Hebrew Studies* 42 (2001): 220-222. See also below.

Nissīm, a character reminiscent of the Iraqi-Jewish poet Anwar Shā'ul (1904-1984). Nissīm is critical of Sawsan and the radical positions he takes against the Jewish religion. To illustrate his point, he quotes from the Talmud, a collection of Rabbinic notes on the Mishnah,[45] the story of Elisha ben Avuya (first half of the second century A.D.)—a great sage who achieved a unique level of Torah knowledge but eventually became a heretic who studied Greek and wished to transcend the traditional parameters set by the Torah. This "crime" was considered so terrible that his colleagues no longer referred to him by name but called him "Akher" (Other), as in the title of the novel. According to Nissīm, Sawsan, like Elisha ben Avuya, went too far in his efforts to assimilate into Arab-Muslim society. However, it seems that Ballas considered the solution Sawsan found to his identity crisis in Iraq as inevitable: "Islam was not only the religion of the majority [in Iraq], but it was also the foundation of Arab civilization. Therefore, if you belong to the [Iraqi] homeland and [Arab] nation you must reject the dual identity."[46] A number of critics commented that this novel could have been written in Arabic by a Muslim Iraqi author and the fact that it was written in Hebrew was marginal.

Although it concentrates on the role of Arab culture in mainstream Israeli society, Ballas' literary project is much more comprehensive, accompanying readers into fresh fictional realms with contemporary implications: *Ash'ab mi-Baghdad* (Ash'ab from Baghdad, 1970) centers on the historical and legendary figure of Ash'ab, a versatile musician of medieval Arab cultural heritage who caught the imagination of the Arabs.[47] In *Hitbaharūt* (Clarification, 1972), the protagonist is an Iraqi-Jewish Israeli citizen who does not participate in the 1973 War. Iraqi characters also appear in his short stories, including those in the collection *Mūl ha-Ḥoma* (In Front of the Wall, 1969). In the novel *Ḥoref Aḥaron* (Last Winter, 1984), the focus is on Middle Eastern exiles in Europe, especially Henri Curiel (1914-1978), a Jewish Communist of Egyptian origin assassinated in Paris. *Solo*

[45] Ḥagigah 15a-b.

[46] According to www.elaph.com, accessed April 17, 2004.

[47] On Ash'ab in classical Arabic literature, see Hilary Kilpatrick, "The 'Genuine' Ash'ab: The Relativity of Fact and Fiction in Early *Adab* Texts," in *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature,* ed. Stefan Leder (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998), 94-117.

(Solo, 1998) is also based on the life of an Egyptian Jew—the dramatist and journalist Yaʿqūb Ṣanūʿ (James Sanua) (1839-1912)—who is considered the father of Egyptian theater and Arabic journalistic humor. *Ḥeder Naʿūl* (A Locked Room, 1980) describes life among members of the Communist Party in Israel. Among his other works, we can mention the self-referential novel *Ha-Yoresh* (The Heir, 1987) as well as *Lo bi-Mkoma* (Not in Her Place, 1994), which has some feminist implications—it deals only indirectly with the issue of Arab immigrants involved with the Communist Party by alluding in general to the question of identity. Ballas's last novels are *Tom ha-Bikkūr* (The End of the Visit, 2008) and *Be-Gūf Rishon* (First Person Singular, 2009), that focuses on Ballas's life story.[48]Experiencing alienation and estrangement, most of Ballas's protagonists—or rather, anti-heroes—are outsiders living on the margins of society and unwilling to compromise on their principles. Preaching a new connection between identity, language, and territory, Ballas demystifies the Hebrew language, attempting to "un-Jew" it—that is, to divorce it from Jewishness in a process of what the French theorists Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Pierre-Félix Guattari (1930-1992) call "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization."[49] The Zionist master narrative, in his view, is an Ashkenazi ideology that developed in a Western cultural milieu and came to stake its claim in the Middle East without embracing the Middle Eastern Arab cultural environment.[50] Zionism, according to Ballas, is based on the European colonialist conception of the Arab East, and so its "attitude toward the Jews from Arab countries was no different from the attitude toward the

[48] On Ballas and his works, see Gila Ramras-Rauch, *The Arab in Israeli Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 184-187; Jayana Clerk and Ruth Siegel, eds., *Modern Literature of the Non-Western World: Where the Waters Are Born* (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995), 459-466; Nancy E. Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 391-394; Muḥammad Jalāʾ Idrīs, *Muʾaththirāt ʿArabiyya wa-Islāmiyya fī al-Adab al-Isrāʾīlī al-Muʿāṣir* (Arabic and Islamic Influence on Contemporary Israeli Literature) (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya, 2003); Sorrel Kerbel, ed., *Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003), 65-66; Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 130-137, 174-175, 188-189, 266-293. See also the aforementioned documentary film, *Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs: The Iraqi Connection*.

[49] Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature?" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson et al. (New York and Cambridge, MA: New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1990), 59-69.

[50] *The Literary Review* 37, no.2 (1994): 67-68.

Arabs."[51] Ballas is now considered by a new generation of critics and scholars to be a prophetic voice who, ever since the mid-1960s, has boldly challenged the Israeli Ashkenazi and Western-oriented reluctance to accept the legitimacy of Arab culture in the Hebrew literary canon. According to these intellectuals, only after drawing new boundaries for Hebrew literature so as to encompass not only cosmopolitan and humanistic values but Arab values as well, will Israeli society be able to boast an original culture in which the aspirations of all its citizens are expressed—Jewish, Muslim, and Christian.

More than any other work, Ballas's *Otot Stav* (Signs of Autumn, 1992) presents his comprehensive world-view. It consists of three novellas, each symbolizing a necessary component in the longed-for Ballasian utopia. Based on autobiographical material, the first novella, "Iyya" (Iyya [the name of the heroine])[52] depicts Iraqi Jews in the late 1940s, before their departure from their homeland, as viewed by a Muslim maid named Zakiyya, nicknamed Iyya within a Jewish family which she "adopted" as her own during the flight of the Iraqi Jews to Israel. The second novella, "Signs of Autumn," centers on the cosmopolitan Egyptian intellectual Ḥusnī Manṣūr, whose character is based on the Egyptian writer Ḥusayn Fawzī (1900-1988), well-known for his books with the mythical figure of al-Sindibād (Sinbad) from *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (A Thousand and One Nights). The third novella, "In the Gates of Kandinski," is about Ya'qov Reshef, an immigrant Jewish painter from Russia, who is torn between the values of the new society and his idealistic aspirations. Failing to pass through "the Gates of Kandinski," he dies two days before the beginning of the new year. The three protagonists of *Otot Stav* illustrate three components of Israeli culture, each of them related to the town where the events of each novella take place: Baghdad, Paris, and Tel-Aviv. For lack of space I will concentrate here only on the first novella.

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[51] *Ha'aretz Magazine*, July 4, 2003, 50.

[52] The novella was originally published in Hebrew in Shimon Ballas, *Otot Stav* (Signs of Autumn) (Tel-Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1992), 7-50. For an English translation, see Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 266-294 (trans. Susan Einbinder).

"Iyya" starts right in the middle of the story, *in medias res* as it were, and unfolds through a circular plot with flashbacks to Iyya's marriage and previous life experiences. An important feature of the novella's narrative that has implications for the topic of identity is that the nature of the characters and their relationships are not made clear, something that is only further obscured by the complex web of interactions between the characters. The novella is also punctuated by dialogues in which there are frequent changes in the identity of the speaker, with the result that it is sometimes difficult to trace the relevant personal pronoun to its antecedent—thus, identity issues are interwoven throughout the text. This style of narration, especially the frequent dialogue interruptions, adds a sense of immediacy to the text. The events are generally told from Iyya's point of view in a stream-of-consciousness-style narrative of remembrances (such as her miserable life before joining the Jewish family and her abusive husband) and interior monologues (such as her bargaining with God or her acceptance of the fate of never having another husband). Often, her present thoughts interrupt the narration of past events: for example, as the Jewish family is preparing to leave the country, the reader has the privilege of being aware of Iyya's inner thoughts about one of the members of the family: "There [in Israel] he won't have to burn papers and hide them from his pursuers. Let them go, let them go!"—Iyya struggles to reconcile her desire to remain with the Jewish family with her understanding that the family will be safer abroad. The mixed feelings about the departure of the family are well-represented in the character of the maid, who will remain in Baghdad—paradoxically, she is a Muslim but will remain the link, the very preserver of the Jewish connection to Baghdad, even after the Jews are gone. There can be nothing worse, in Iyya's view, than leaving one's homeland, and she cannot understand the decision to "abandon everything and go." Moreover, she views Israel as backward, and assumes that everyone there is a poor farmer or a menial laborer: "A beautiful and educated girl, splendid and upright, how would she [Sophie] do farm work? Like those sunburned barefooted girls?"—Iyya is clearly not able to fathom an identity or any real belonging for the members of the Jewish family in Israel, away from the relative luxury and refinement of Baghdad, compared to what was expected for them in the new Jewish state. Furthermore, she asks: "How would Baghdad look without Jews?"

The text gives the reader a sense of the cultural cohesiveness of Baghdad as a place of diversity and cooperation, each group being a necessary part of the whole, with the Jews being an integral part of the local Baghdadi and even national Iraqi-Arab identity. She cannot imagine one of the characters, Sarah, carrying out the chores that she normally does, such as washing clothes: "How will they manage there? Sarah doing laundry? In a tent?" As the kitchen is Iyya's own private space, her refuge and, at the same time, her source of strength, we do not see any other characters inside it, thus reinforcing her role as the glue that keeps the family together—"On leaving the kitchen, she suddenly felt weak." Musings over her identity frequently strike Iyya: she may even be considered to be an allegory for Baghdad itself—she is "more Jewish than Muslim and a Muslim among Jews." She remains silent over others' accusations that the Jews are a cursed race condemned to be degraded, and she does not feel the Jewish identity enough to take sides, but she sees her relationship with the Jewish family as that with her own family, and not as that with an employer. Although she admits that she is essentially a servant, Iyya does not feel comfortable working for someone else—it seems that the idea of family is more important for her than earning money and being a part of her actual family, that has failed her, namely her mother, father, and husband: "She realized that all she had to say was now meaningless to them." The Jewish family is leaving Baghdad, and she has difficulties in letting go of them, identifying more strongly with the Jewish family than with her own sister's household.

Ballas uses a very disjointed stream-of-consciousness method to write the novella, which takes place over a short time span, even though it recounts events occurring throughout the maid's life. The use of this very fluid, uncensored method helps the reader see the richness of her life and gives profound meaning (rooted in the "everydayness" of the prose) to the relationships between the characters. Iyya feels that she is incapable of protecting the Jewish family—"I, a panic-stricken, miserable woman?" Even though she is a Muslim from the local Iraqi majority, her identification as a woman clearly ascribes to her a marginalized otherness, perhaps as a result of her history of domestic abuse. She compares her own personal plight with the that of the children of the Jewish family and with her "beast" of a husband. Iyya goes out often, always saying "defensively" that she needs fresh air, walking the streets independently, running errands and meeting people. It is

understood that in Arab traditional society women should stay inside, and thus Iyya feels that she needs to defend her decision to go out. She is possibly motivated by her traditional upbringing and her mother telling her to obey her husband as if he were her master—and he forbid her to go outside. The freedom of the outdoors versus the horrible conditions inside the closed doors is a contrast that is frequently deployed by the author to illustrate Iyya's past, as can be seen when she returns to the "wretched room" with her mother. The closing of the novella seems to be deliberately ambiguous, but is undoubtedly symbolic, with Iyya receiving a Qur'ān as a present from one of the sons of the Jewish family before their departure, echoing ancient verses by the Andalusian Ṣūfī Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī (1164-1240) in *Tarjūmān al-Ashwāq* (The Translator of Desires), that had been so relevant for the coexistence of Jews and Muslims in Baghdad but would suddenly never be so again:

لقد صار قلبي قابلا كلّ صورة فمرعى لغزلان ودير لرهبان
وبيت لأوثـــان وكعبة طائـــف وألواح توراة ومصحف قرآن
أدين بدين الحبّ أنّى توجّـــهت ركائبه فالحـبّ ديني وإيمـاني

My heart is capable of every form,
A pasture for gazelles, and a cloister for monks,
A place for idols, and the pilgrim's *Ka'ba*,
The Tables of the Torah, and the Koran.
Love is the faith I hold wherever turn its
Camels, love is my belief and faith.[53]

Sammy Michael: "I Activated a Forgetting Mechanism"

Unlike Shimon Ballas, most of the immigrating Arab-Jewish writers who succeeded in adapting to writing in Hebrew adopted the Zionist master narrative in their literary work, with the most prominent among them being the aforementioned Sammy Michael (b. 1926). Born in Baghdad to a traditional

[53] Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī, *Turjumān al-Ashwāq* (The Interpreter of the Desires) (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1966), 43-44.

family, at the outbreak of the Second World War Michael became involved in a leftist underground group fighting against the Iraqi regime and then joined the Iraqi Communist Party.[54] Sentenced to death in 1948, he fled to Iran and from there to Israel, with no Zionist motives whatsoever.[55] His world view found expression in his participation in the editorial board of the Israeli Communist journal, *al-Ittiḥād* as well as in his literary work published under the pen name "Samīr Mārid" (literally, "Samīr [is] a rebel"), that emphasized social and national injustice and supported the battle against the bourgeoisie.[56] During the first three years of the magazine *al-Jadīd*, between 1953-1955, he published in it ten stories, the greatest number of stories published in that journal by a single writer. In the same time span, the next highest number of published stories was attributed to the Palestinian poet and writer Ḥannā Ibrāhīm (1927-2020), who contributed only five stories. Michael's stories evinced a strong social awareness of the gap between the various classes in Israeli society and emphasized the necessity to improve the conditions of the proletarian masses. For example, his story "'Abbās" ('Abbās [the name of the hero])[57] describes the role of the Communist Party in society and the suffering of its members as they sacrifice themselves for the collective welfare.

Michael was one of the first Arab-Jewish writers to understand the delicate position of the Arab-Jewish author in a Hebrew-speaking society, against the background of the clashing national narratives. In the early 1950s, he even tried his hand at writing in Hebrew—he started a novel that took place in a *ma'abara*, that is, an immigrant transit camp. In 1954, he published a chapter of the novel, entitled "Ḥarīq" (Fire), but only in Arabic translation.[58] He was unable to find a publisher for the novel and continued to write and publish in Arabic. This is why I consider his story "al-Fannān wa-l-Falāfil" (The Artist and the Falafel)[59] as one of the most

[54] According to al-Barāk, *al-Madāris al-Yahūdiyya*, 249, Michael – at the time called Ṣāliḥ Menasheh – joined the party on August 17, 1946.

[55] *Ba-Maḥane*, March 22, 1989, 23. See also *Moznaim*, July-August 1986, 16. On the way of life in the underground in Iraq, see his novel *Ḥofen shel 'Arafel* (A Handful of Fog) (1979).

[56] See, for example, his story "Muḥarrir Aūrūba" (The Liberator of Europe) in *al-Ittiḥād* (monthly supplement) 9, no. 1: 17-27. See also his story "Fī Ziḥām al-Madīna" (In the Tumult of the City) (*al-Jadīd*, November 1955, 26-29).

[57] *Al-Jadīd*, February 1955, 24-29; and Moreh, *al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣīra*, 225-232.

[58] *Al-Jadīd*, December 1954, 39-43.

[59] The story was first published in *al-Jadīd*, December 1955, 30-36. For an English translation, see

significant and insightful literary contributions by any Arab-Jewish writer in the last stage of Arabic literature by Jews before its total demise. The author chose as the stage of his story the city of Haifa in northern Israel, where he had been living since his emigration from Iraq, a city that still boasts a mixed population of different religions—Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druzes, Bahais, and others—despite the collapse of the urban life that the city had developed in mandatory Palestine.

The story is about a hungry deaf-mute child who begs passerby for money by drawing American cowboys on the sidewalks of the streets of Haifa. This boy-artist "did not blame 'bad luck' as most mature people do when they stumble on hard times, but rather he would try to find the cause that deprived him." The story illustrates the complicated picture of the new Arab-Jewish experience in Israel after its establishment, where society was torn between Jews and Palestinians, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, and rich and poor, in addition to the other sections of Israeli society included in the author's panoramic view . For example, Michael, as an Arab-Jewish author, did not ignore the misery of Holocaust survivors one of the characters is a survivor who sells thermometers and can barely function because of his uncontrollable trembling; he is like a ghost as he does not engage with others around him and other people pay very little attention to him.

The starving boy-artist wanders the streets of Haifa in order to display his artistic creativity. He paints on the asphalt images of the unarmed American cowboy—a romantic, heroic symbol, independent and strong, that seems to fly above the ground. His paintings are surrealistic, just as the term "artist" that is used to describe him is unrealistic. Separating his cowboy from the mundane, the boy-artist makes it his own special possession that the curious stares of the crowd cannot harm. He is very hungry, but at the same time finds it difficult to believe that he cannot assign responsibility for his miserable situation. He looks for some sort of causation, an explanation for his hunger, but he seems to discover that there is no true explanation to be found. The core of the story is that the crowd enjoys

Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 232-237. For a Hebrew translation, see Snir, '*Arvijyūt, Yahadūt, Tsiyonūt*, 544-548.

seeing this deaf-mute boy wrapped in rags engaged in the process of his artistic creation. While casting his art under their feet, a few people would say in a knowing tone: "He's an orphan and his aunt is disabled." In spite of this, no one finds even some measure or other of gallantry in the child's art, the gallantry of a person bent over the sidewalk for the sake of his aunt. Furthermore, they throw coins on the ground not out of compassion for the disabled aunt, nor for the hungry child, nor even out of a desire to reward the artist for his art, but as a little reward to the *clown* who provided them with entertainment on one of their cold winter evenings. The boy-artist is aware that the crowd sees him as akin to a clown, and the narrator takes care to provide readers with a great deal of sympathy for him, turning their attention to the gap between society and the individual. Nature is also portrayed as sympathetic with the boy and, at the same time, antagonistic to the people around him, as illustrated by a strong gust of cruel wind that is received "with great displeasure, for it took the street away from them." Because of the reality of destitution, food must come before artistry or self-expression, and this is undoubtedly the reason why the boy is willing to put up with being on display to passersby as little more than a charming freak show: "The crowd enjoys seeing this ragamuffin deaf-mute creating art under their feet."

As Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) pointed out in his one-act play *Huis Clos* (No Exit) (1944), "hell is other people"—the Other, that by which we define ourselves and that which is not ourselves is, or can be, a source of distress. We construct a hell for ourselves, Sartre says, if we refuse to take responsibility for our own actions, leaving us at the mercy of others. Constantly worried about where the next meal will come from and obsessed with the smell of the falafel before him, the creativity of the boy-artist is contrasted with his own survival. He goes "wild with rage" because he cannot eat his wares, the drawings, like the boy who sells chocolate or the woman selling falafel, who is presented by the author in a sensual way ("the face of the woman with the very red fingernails"), thus mixing food preparation and sexual desire. On the other hand, the girl selling flowers and her mother, like the Holocaust survivor, are sad and neglected and in danger of being toppled ("He saw someone walk backward and almost fall on the vessel with the flowers"). In this story, that examines what is traditionally seen as mundane, Michael's marked pessimism is mixed with an insight that although the world is often arbitrary and

unkind, and although we cannot always find reasons for what happens to us, we cannot accept this reality. The kindness of others is one way in which we can overcome our situation, and Michael ruminates on why people are not generous toward those less fortunate than them, describing the cynical people who throw coins to the artist because they view him as a clown designed for their entertainment. While Michael is certainly condemning the reductionist viewpoint that turns human beings into tools for one's satisfaction, his message is far more complicated: the movie-goers' feet trampling the horse and rider, the unarmed cowboy, that is, the indifference of the middle class, do not upset the artist. Art and its inspiration can overcome physical harm to the art itself, and its ultimate value is a way for the artist to express himself rather than as a means for getting money. The kindness of strangers and the solidarity among the oppressed and marginalized are what is really important, and this can be seen when the artist tries to help the mother and daughter who sell flowers. Although the artist has no "friends" on the street, they all seem to have a kind of symbiotic and supportive relationship, and this insight would serve Michael's next literary contributions in Hebrew, as we will see below. Michael's Arabic story "The Artist and the Falafel" might however be read now as referring to the author's own contemporary role in Israeli society: a clown who provides the canonical local Ashkenazi elite with entertainment and amusement, but who has never been considered a true part of it.

In the late 1950s, after six years of devoted adherence to Communism, Michael ceased publishing in Arabic. At about the same time, he left the Communist Party—he could no longer face, he says, the constant self-justification involved in his Communist activities. It was the first step in a long process of adapting himself to mainstream Israeli society. Then came the issue of language: as a Jew writing in Arabic, he was confronted with the need for self-justification: "I continued to read the world's literature in English, spoke a broken Hebrew on the street, and bemoaned my fate, silently, in Arabic." After he had consolidated his position as a writer of short stories in Arabic, the question was whether he should adapt to the new cultural surroundings and make the required shift in his aesthetic "preference" in the hope of finding a new audience, or to continue writing in Arabic in a country where Arabic was now the language of the enemy. In the

process of adopting the Hebrew language, he says, the fluency of his Arabic writing was impaired: "I activated a forgetting mechanism."[60] Michael entered a period of silence during which he joined the Israel Hydrological Service in the Ministry of Agriculture, where he worked for twenty-five years surveying water sources located mainly on the Syrian border. He also studied Arabic literature and psychology at the University of Haifa. Ending his literary silence, his first published novel was a Hebrew one, *Shavīm ve-Shavīm Yoter* (Equal and More Equal, 1974). The book, whose nucleus is the aforementioned "Ḥarīq" (Fire) written in the 1950s, exposed the humiliating attitude of the authorities to immigrants from Arab countries. It raised a storm of protests, bringing to the fore the ethnic question and stirring public controversy through its representation of the oppression of Oriental immigrants. For the first time, the novel brought to Hebrew literature the motif of the DDT spray with which these immigrants were disinfected, a motif immediately adopted as a symbol of the humiliation of those immigrants in Israeli society. Mainstream literary critics, however, referred to the novel, as to other Hebrew works by writers from Arab countries, as inferior protest literature with no real literary value.

In his later novels, Michael continued to focus on the margins of Israeli society. In *Ḥasūt* (Refuge, 1977), he deals with Jewish-Christian-Muslim relationships against the background of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War (also known as the Yom Kippur War). The story takes place in Haifa and in Jenīn in the West Bank, and all the major figures are members of the Israeli Communist Party. *Ḥofen shel 'Arafel* (A Handful of Fog, 1979) is about the pluralistic Iraqi society of the 1940s prior to the mass emigration of the Jews. *Ḥatsotsra ba-Wadī* (A Trumpet in the Wadi, 1987) depicts relationships between Jews and Arabs in Haifa in light of the Lebanon war of the 1980s. The novel was adapted for the stage at the Haifa Municipal Theater, and a film based upon the novel won the first prize at Haifa Festival. Some of Michael's works were adapted to the theater, and he also wrote original plays, among them *Shedīm ba-Martef* (Demons in the Basement, 1983) and *Te'omīm* (Twins, 1988), both of which were performed at the Haifa Municipal Theater. Apart from his original writings, Michael translated into Hebrew the Cairene

[60] See www.haaretz.com, accessed July 30, 2006.

trilogy of the Egyptian Nobel laureate Najīb Maḥfūẓ (1911-2006).[61] Michael wrote for children and youth as well, and among his books targeted at this audience are *Sūfa Bein ha-Dekalīm* (Storm Among the Palms, 1975), *Paḥonīm ve-Ḥalomot* (Tin Shacks and Dreams, 1997), *Ahava Bein ha-Dekalīm* (Love Among the Palms, 1990), *Shedīm Ḥumīm* (Brown Devils, 1993), *Otiyot Holchot La-Yam* (The ABC Go to the Sea, 2009), *Tzartzaron Shar Gam Ba-Ḥoref* (Little Cricket Also Singing in the Winter, 2012), and *Tippa ve-Tipponet* (A Drop and a Little Drop, 2015). His writing for children was inspired, according to his testimony, by the contradictions he experienced when it came to child-adult relationships: while in Iraq a child's opinions were ignored, the child in Israel is the all-important center of the family. Much more than in his writings for adults, in his books for children Michael showed a strong tendency to adapt himself to mainstream Israeli society.[62] It was, however, the publication of his best-selling novel *Victoria* (Victoria [the name of the heroine], 1993), more than any other of his works, that established Michael as a well-known mainstream writer. The novel soared to the top of the Israeli best-seller list, selling more than one hundred thousand copies; for fifty weeks, it stayed at the top of the list of the newspaper *Ha'aretz*'s weekly books supplement. It was translated into many languages, including English, Dutch, German, Greek, Arabic, and French. Named for its female heroine who, as her name suggests, succeeds in gaining a victory over the challenges of her life, the novel describes the life of Iraqi Jews before and after their emigration. It has been argued that the cultural accent with which Michael wrote was that of the margins, a minority accent, even while entering the mainstream. Because the novel challenged traditional values of the Jewish family in Iraq, and because it was

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[61] On Michael and his work, see Ramras-Rauch, *The Arab in Israel*, 179-183; Doli Benhabib, *Sami Michael - Be'yot shel Beniyat Subyektivyut Mizraḥīt* (Sammy Michael - Problems of Constructing Mizrahi Subjectivity), PhD thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2002; Kerbel, *Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, 373-374; Nancy Berg, *More and More Equal: The Literary Works of Sami Michael* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004); Adia Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel: Literary Perspectives* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2014), 47-53, 80-84; Yigal Schwartz, ed., *A Prince and a Revolutionary: Studies of the Fiction of Sami Sammy Michael* (Hebrew) (Beer Sheva and Or Yehuda: Gamma, Heksherim, Dvir, 2016); and Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 99-102, 124-127, 175-176, 186-188, 232-237.

[62] On Michael's books for children, see Yaffah Berlovitz, "The Place of Children's Literature in the Work of Sami Michael: A Poetical Discourse" (Hebrew), in *A Prince and a Revolutionary*, ed. Schwartz , 32-74.

permeated by a sensual atmosphere steeped in sexual encounters, including episodes of incest and pedophilia, it raised a great deal of protest and ire among Iraqi-Jewish intellectuals, who accused the author of serving the interests of the Ashkenazi establishment. They protested especially against the sexual descriptions that provided an unflattering picture of Jewish family life in Iraq. The author, for example, describes mattresses spread out on the roofs where "recalcitrant women were raped night after night, despite their curses," and "tigresses won tigers; together they shook the roof and its tens of inhabitants", while others heard everything and saw most of it. Some critics, however, described the novel as exotic, fantastic, and sensational with a plot flavored with elements of *A Thousand and One Nights*, and an attempt was even made to classify it together with Gustave Flaubert's (1821-1880) *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Leo Tolstoy's (1828-1910) *Anna Karenina* (1877).

Here, some explanation is needed in order to clarify the attitude of some mainstream critics toward literary works such as *Victoria*, especially when exaggerated praises are showered on them. In various publications, I have referred to such praises for Palestinian and Mizrahi authors in Israeli-Jewish society as politically correct gestures, in fact nothing more than a way out of the aforementioned Israeli-Jewish-Ashkenazi mainstream's cognitive dissonance, and as a tool to preserve the cozy reassurance of the canonical center's liberal and tolerant attitude toward the culture of the margins.[63] This is doubly evident in the Western orientation of Israeli culture and its repugnance for Arabic and Mizrahi culture, although the cultural Hebrew establishment cannot publicly express this, owing to its general views concerning the need for a proper liberal and pluralistic attitude toward the cultures of others. To solve this cognitive dissonance, the establishment "assigns" to apparent "chosen" representatives of the Palestinian and Mizrahi voices "seats" in the local cultural arena. A survey of Israeli media in general and cultural magazines, printed and electronic in particular, would show that interest in Arabic and Mizrahi literature and culture

[63] The fact that the novel was translated into Arabic by Samīr Naqqāsh, the greatest of the modern Jewish writers in Arabic, illustrates the gap between Michael as a mainstream writer in Israel and the marginalized status of Naqqāsh, who had to find his livelihood in translating a novel, which he rejected because of its Zionist message.

is generally not a truly aesthetic preference but a politically correct enterprise. When the Israeli media needs to present the view of the "Other," it usually turns to the same writers and intellectuals, who seem to be on call to play the role of decorative tokens in Israeli culture. Whenever an academic, cultural, social, or political activity requires an "authentic Oriental speaker," their names emerge and are "forever 'burdened' with the glorious weight of that representation."[64] Nevertheless, according to Michael himself, like his heroine Victoria, he has had the upper hand, as he claimed in the aforementioned documentary film *Forget Baghdad* (2002): "When I first arrived here in Israel, I decided to found a state called "Sami Michael." [There has been] an ongoing fight between [the State of] Israel and [the state of] myself. Of course, both the state and myself wanted to be [victorious]. But today I can say that I have won."[65]

After the publication of *Victoria*, Michael published other novels—*Mayim Noshkīm le-Mayim* (Water Kissing Water, 2001), *Yonīm be-Trafalgar* (Doves in Trafalgar, 2005), *'Ayida* (English title: *Aida* [the name of the heroine], 2008), *Ma'of Ha-Barboorim* (The Flight of the Swans, 2011), *Yahlom min ha-Yeshimon* (A Diamond from the Desert, 2015)—all of them have consolidated Michael's mainstream status as a Hebrew writer who abandoned his Arab literary preferences. Moreover, *Mayim Noshkīm le-Mayim* deals with the topic not only directly but in a meta-fictional way as well.[66]

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[64] Following Ella Shohat's words referring to Edward W. Said (1935-2003) as a "Palestinian speaker" in the United States; see Ella Shohat, "Antinomies of Exile: Said and the Frontiers of National Narrations," in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader,* ed. Michael Sprinker (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 121.

[65] This is the written translation of his Arabic original text, which appears in the subtitles of the film, with necessary modifications. The exact wording of the original Arabic spoken text was slightly different.

[66] See Snir, '*Arviyyūt, Yahadūt, Tsiyonūt*, 322-325. In his critical comments to my article, one of the anonymous reviewers illustrates the elitist arrogant tendency of the literary canonical center of Israeli culture toward Arabic literary writing by Jews. For example, not being aware of Michael's extensive Arabic literary writing, he argues that "the claim that Sami Michael adopts the Zionist narrative in his works [...] is a familiar position, but newer studies present a more complex position." He mentions Yigal Schwartz's article "Sami Michael: a Prince, a Revolutionary and a Realist - The Social Novels of Sammy Michael and Israeli Fiction" (in Hebrew), Schwartz (ed.), *A Prince and a Revolutionary*, 7-31. However, nowhere in Schwartz's article, neither in any other article in the same collection, one can find any hint to the change in Michael's attitude towards Zionism, as reflected in his shift from Arabic to Hebrew. Furthermore, all the contributors to the

Elī ʻAmīr: "To Speak the Other's Language Without Renouncing his Own"

Unlike Ballas and Michael, Elī ʻAmīr (b. 1937)[67] has never published in Arabic and his literary output is only in Hebrew, though he has occasionally displayed his talent as a traditional *ḥakawātī* (storyteller) on televised Arabic-language programs. After emigrating from Iraq to Israel in 1950, ʻAmīr was sent with his family—his parents and six siblings—to live in a cloth tent in a *maʻabara*. Although he had finished eighth grade in Baghdad, he was accepted only in the fourth grade: "The Ashkenazim thought that we had just come down from the trees," he complained.[68] Eventually, he was sent to receive his education in the kibbutz Mishmar ha-ʻEmek, which he would later describe as "the most important and decisive" experience of his life.[69] After holding positions in the Ministry of Integration and serving as an emissary of the Sephardi Federation in the United States, he was appointed Director-General of *ʻAliyyat ha-Noʻar* (Youth Immigration) in the Jewish Agency, which would later become part of the Ministry of Education. This Zionist path, in which ʻAmīr, starting out as a young ʻ*oleh ḥadash* (new immigrant) comes to be in charge of the fate of young immigrants, would induce him to adopt enthusiastically the Zionist master narrative, which considers the Jewish exodus from Iraq as the new exodus of the Children of Israel.

Arab-Muslim culture has been an integral part of ʻAmīr's background; he also majored in Arabic language and literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He made his literary debut in the mid-1970s with a part of his memoirs, a sort of short story titled "Tarnegol Kappara" (Rooster of Atonement), which was included in a reader for students (1978) edited by Abraham Stahl (1933-2000).

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collection overlook not only Michael's many works in Arabic published during the 1950s, but the whole extensive Arabic literature written by Jews, with the exception of only minor references (91, where Orit Bashkin was only satisfied with mentioning two of my studies!). It is ironical that Doli Benhabib, one of the few scholars who investigated Michael's Arabic literary works in her aforementioned PhD thesis, contributed an article to the collection but this article *does not refer at all* to Michael's Arabic works!

[67] His original name in Iraq was Fu'ād Ilyās Nāṣiḥ Khalaschī.

[68] *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, March 18, 1988, 4.

[69] *Ha'aretz*, February 8, 1985,16.

Eight years later, with a slightly different title, this text would serve as the nucleus for his first quasi-autobiographical novel, *Tarnegol Kapparot* (Rooster of Atonements, 1983), on the dwarfing of the image of the father figure in the eyes of his children, which "brings you to want revenge."[70] Described as "casually turning a flashlight into a dark corner of a field and catching the eyes of a ferocious beast,"[71] the novel immediately proved to be a best-seller: it was published in eighteen editions (about seventy-thousand copies) and was successfully adapted to the small screen by the veteran Israeli filmmaker Dan Wolman (b. 1941). The protagonist Nūrī, a young boy of Iraqi origin, is sent from the *ma'abara* to receive his education in the fictional Kiryat Oranīm, a kibbutz in the Yizrael Valley established by Polish pioneers. Nūrī's struggle to become one of "them"—the arrogant and aristocratic *Sabra* youth (native-born Israeli Jews) —epitomizes the conflict between East and West, and between the original values of the Oriental immigrants and the Ashkenazi values enforced upon them. When he came to the kibbutz accompanied by "the whole of Jewish Baghdad," Nūrī attempted to reassure himself that the painful process through which he would acquire his new identity would not come at the expense of his original one. 'Amīr considers the novel a way of "settling accounts with myself and with Zionism,"[72] but the Zionist narrative dominates it and the fate of Nūrī is dictated by Ashkenazi (Western) values. The Polish-born Israeli-Hebrew writer Aharon Megged (1920-2016) referred to the novel as "one of the significant treasures of Jewish culture, like the stories of the Jewish villages in Poland and Russia."[73]Heavily colored by "invented tradition"[74] —mainly, as regards creating a national identity and promoting national unity, and legitimizing certain institutions and cultural practices—'Amīr's second novel, *Mafriyaḥ ha-Yonīm* (The Pigeoneer, 1993), has at its core the desire of Arabized Jews to return to their ancient homeland. Referring to the relationship of the past to the present, 'Amīr says that "it is a mixture that can hardly be reduced to its original components [...] I told my story

[70] *Ha'aretz*, February 8, 1985, 16; and *Maariv*, April 25, 1989,B9.

[71] *The Jerusalem Post*, March 11, 1988, 15.

[72] *Ba-Ma'rakha*, 281, March 1984, 12-13.

[73] *Yedi'ot Aḥronot*, March 19, 1993, 27.

[74] See Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

through my anxiety about the fate of Israeli society."[75] This panoramic novel, a kind of *Bildungsroman* based on the author's childhood in Iraq, is told through the eyes of the protagonist Kabī when he is attaining the age of puberty. Highlighting the historical events on the eve of the mass emigration, it depicts the Jews' complicated relationship with their Muslim neighbors and is steeped in sensual descriptions touching on almost every aspect of Jewish life in the colorful exotic streets and alleys of Baghdad. Described as "one of the most important achievements of Hebrew literature in recent years,"[76] the novel is populated by dynamic figures that reflect the diversity of characters in a kind of Baghdad found in the *Thousand and One Nights*. The events of the plot are flavored with the music of the Egyptian singer and composer Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1901-1991) and the Jewish singer Salīma Murād Bāsha (1905-1974), erotic belly-dancing with the dancer Bahiyya, seductive prostitutes, adventurous sailing on the Tigris, summer nights on rooftops, rich cousins, smells of spices, and the sexual dreams of the adolescent narrator whose fantasies include Rachelle, his uncle's wife, the teacher Sylvia, and Amīra, Abū Edwar's daughter, who will end up, like him, in a kibbutz. Within the rich and varied social mosaic of the novel, each character represents a particular way of approaching the national and existential issues faced by Iraqi Jews. However, one may raise doubts concerning the author's implied tendency to depict the figure of the teacher Salīm Afandī as a typical Communist—he is presented as a *carpe diem* hedonist—while all evidence shows that Salīm Afandī by no means reflects the nature of contemporary Iraqi-Jewish Communist activists. It should also be noted that the Communist option in Iraq was even more popular among Jews at the time than was the Zionist underground. The novel conveys the tragedy of the first generation of Iraqi immigrants. In Iraq, Kabī's father Salmān dreamed of growing rice in the Ḥula Valley of northern Israel, but soon after he kissed the sacred soil of the "Promised Land" his dreams were shattered by reality. Likewise, 'Amīr's own father collapsed after immigration—this is the reason, says the author, why it was only in his second autobiographical novel that he returned to his childhood: "The confrontation with the figure of the father for me was difficult"[77] and "when writing this

[75] *Ba-Ma'rakha*, 281, March 1984, 12.

[76] *Moznayim*, February-March 1993, 70.

[77] *Yedi'ot Aḥronot*, March 19, 1993, 27.

Hebrew novel, I imagined myself listening in one ear to my father telling it to me in Arabic."[78] Unlike the father, the mother in the novel, Umm Kabī, who initially opposed emigration, shows a marvelous ability to adjust. Still, the father's disappointment is mingled with a glimmer of hope—the birth of his first *Sabra* son signifies, in its own way, a new beginning.

Six years later, ʻAmīr surprised his readers with a third novel, *Ahavat Shaʼūl* (Shaʼul's Love, 1998), which departed from his own fictionalized experiences and the autobiographical alter egos of Nūrī and Kabī. Appealing to mainstream Israeli readers, it touches on Ashkenazim, Sephardim of the Old Yishuv, Oriental Jews, the Israeli army, and the Holocaust, and its plot verges on the melodramatic. One critic wrote that "ʻAmīr compensates his heroes and readers with plenty of tasty food, sexual encounters serenaded by joyous Hebrew songs, journeys which are full of love for the land and tributes to the gathering of Jewish immigrants."[79] Also noteworthy in the novel is the author's implied view regarding the territorial price Israel should pay for peace in the Middle East.

Seven years later, ʻAmīr returned to telling his own life story and published *Yasmīn* (Yasmin [the name of the heroine], 2005), a sequel to his previous two autobiographical novels. The protagonist is Nūrī, the young boy from *Mafriyaḥ ha-Yonīm*, who is now serving as a governmental adviser on Arab affairs. With the publication of this new novel, ʻAmīr fulfilled his dream of composing a trilogy similar to that of Najīb Maḥfūẓ, whom he highly admires, having said as much in his essay about their meeting in Cairo.[80] This trilogy covers what ʻAmīr once described as "the via dolorosa of being an Israeli and devoting myself to this society."[81] However, *Yasmīn*—a love story between a Jewish man and an Arab-Christian woman—seems to be much closer to *Ahavat Shaʼūl* than to the other two parts of ʻAmīr's trilogy, especially in his strong desire to appeal to mainstream readers, even if the novel is critical of the Israeli establishment, especially regarding

[78] Personal communication with ʻAmīr, May 23, 2000.
[79] *Yediʻot Aḥronot*, February 20, 1998, 28.
[80] *Yediʻot Aḥronot*, December 3, 1999, 26.
[81] Israeli Radio, February 16, 1991.

the events following the 1967 War.[82] In a review of the novel, the poet and scholar Yochai Oppenheimer (b. 1958) shows how "the author even tends to make the reader forget about the trauma of the banishment from Iraq and about the difficult experience of adjusting to a new country." The emotional tension that was characteristic of his previous autobiographical works is "given no expression in this novel, which has no characters that inspire any rage or genuine pity in the reader's heart." He further claims that in *Yasmīn* 'Amīr graphically illustrates what the critic Fredric Jameson (b. 1934), following Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), terms the "prison-house of language."[83] Oppenheimer argues that the enlightened occupier, who proclaims words of "heresy" against the consensus, "is no different, in this respect, from the benighted occupier who proclaims messianic visions." The "prison-house" also relates to the selection of a shop-worn format that "turns literary creations into a constant, harmless chaperon of the occupation, into a means of generating excitement that does not require any commitment and relates to the complexity of the conflict between two nations and to the human tragedy involved." Also, his choice to cling to the clichés of the political discourse does create a "realistic" novel, as the back cover announces, but it is a realistic novel that "lacks a suitable independent artistic stance."[84] 'Amīr's last novel *Na'ar Ha-Ofanayim* (Bicycle Boy, 2018) is another quasi-autobiographical work in which he returns to his protagonist Nūrī from the aforementioned *Mafriyaḥ ha-Yonīm* (The Pigeoneer, 1993). Now Nūrī leaves the Kibbutz, upon his father's request to come and help the family in the transit camp, but soon after his return he is asked again to move to Jerusalem to try to assist the whole family to relocate to Jerusalem. While working as a distributor of newspapers, he finds a job as a delivery boy at the Prime Minster office, where he can witness significant occurrences in the life of the young Jewish state. The events of the novel occur during the first half of the 1950s, and more precisely between 1953, when the author was sixteen, and 1956, before the start of the Suez Crisis, when Israeli armed forces pushed into Egypt

[82] Avraham Burg (b. 1955), former Knesset speaker and former head of the Jewish Agency, considers the novel to be a kind of an elegy on the missed opportunity to let Arabized Jews build bridges between the new Israel and the old, ancient Middle East; see Avraham Burg, *Le-Natseḥ et Hitler* (Victory Over Hitler) (Tel-Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth Books and Chemed Books, 2007), 52.

[83] See Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

[84] Yochai Oppenheimer, "My Gentle Occupier" [Hebrew], *Ha'aretz* (Books), February 9, 2005.

toward the Suez Canal after Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) nationalized it. Here the narrator is much more sophisticated than in his previous novels, in fact, if we compare him to the author himself, and the views he has expressed in the media, we can safely say that ʻAmīr himself functions as the narrator of this novel, in other words, the gap between the narrator and the implied author is very small. We can see this, for example, when the narrator uses terms such as *ʻAravim Yehudim* (Arab-Jews) (p. 396), or when Nūrī wonders "why we don't learn at school on the Jews' life in the Arab countries" (p. 394)—both issues started to be discussed in Hebrew public cultural and intellectual discourse only in the 1980s. The voice of the implied author of the novel is expressed very well in the school where Nūrī studies, when the teacher asks one of the students to read aloud a eulogy that the Israeli Chief of Staff at the time, Moshe Dayan (1915-1981), gave for Roi Rotberg, a kibbutz security officer killed on April 29, 1956 near the Gaza Strip. ʻAmīr quotes the whole text of the eulogy, some sections of which reflect the author's views when he published the novel, such as when Dayan refers to the murderers of the young officer:

> Let us not cast the blame on the murderers today. Why should we declare their burning hatred for us? For eight years they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and the villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate. It is not among the Arabs in Gaza, but in our own midst that we must seek Roi's blood. How did we shut our eyes and refuse to look squarely at our fate, and see, in all its brutality, the destiny of our generation?[85]

ʻAmīr has propagated the central myths of Zionism—the kibbutz, *ʻaliyya*, and the Israeli army—and since the mid-1990s has been considered one of the most established Hebrew writers. One of his novels, *Mafriyaḥ ha-Yonīm*, was even published in a shortened version (by Rina Tsdaka) for a young audience as part of the Israeli Hebrew school curriculum. ʻAmīr's novels are steeped in an awareness of the injustice done to the Oriental Jews, but at the same time they deal with the

[85] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_and_eulogy_of_Roi_Rotberg (accessed July 23, 2020).

mitigating circumstances under which the Zionist vision was pursued. The founders of the kibbutz had themselves rebelled against their original culture with the aim of "overturning the pyramid," as Dolek, in charge of the fertilizer section in *Tarnegol Kapparot*, puts it. Dolek himself had abandoned his doctoral studies in physics in order to take part in the Zionist project. 'Amīr expresses his appreciation of the way in which the kibbutz has absorbed the newcomers and the values it represents. "No other immigrant society in the modern era has registered," says 'Amīr, "a comparable success or social revolution in absorbing nearly two million immigrants in difficult economic conditions and while fighting five wars."[86] Attempting to bridge the gap between East and West, he is trying in his novels to fulfill Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) ideal "to speak the other's language without renouncing his own."[87] Yet, more than any other author of Iraqi origin, his writings illustrate the adoption of the Zionist master narrative.[88]

*Almog Behar: "*Anā min al-Yahūd*"*

The demise of Arab-Jewish writing in Arabic may be best illustrated by Almog Behar's (b. 1978) story "Anā min al-Yahūd" (I Am One of the Jews).[89] Behar was born in Ra'anana, Israel, to an Iraqi-born mother and a father that was born in Copenhagen. He was expected to grow up, like many of his ilk, as a *Sabra* —a native-born Israeli Jew which should have distanced him from any dimension of Arab-Jewish identity and culture, were it not for a conscious twist of fate: he decided to create for himself an Arab-Jewish identity or, better still, to reclaim the

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[86] *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, March 18, 1988, 4.

[87] Henry Louis Jr. Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah, eds., *"Race," Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 333.

[88] On 'Amīr and his works, see also Berg, *Exile from Exile*, 391-394; Kerbel, *Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, 42-43; Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel*, 91-95; and Oppenheimer, *Mi-Rḥov Ben-Gurion to Shāri' al-Rashīd*, 22-23, 60-61, 148-150, 194-195, 217-218, 254-259.

[89] The story was first published in *Ha'aretz*, Literary Supplement, April 22, 2005. For an English translation, see Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 309-316. The Arabic translation, by Muḥammad 'Abbūd, was published on his blog at http://aboud78.blogspot.com/ (accessed September 24, 2020). For a short film based on the story, see https://www.facebook.com/anaminelyahud/ (accessed August 5, 2019). For a theatrical production based on the story, see http://www.arab-hebrew-theatre.org.il/show.php?id=6594 (accessed August 1, 2020). On the story itself, see Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel*, 112-120; and Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 142-148, 168-169, 189-190, 196-202.

identity of his Iraqi-Arab mother and her original family. In fact, Behar is one of the only few members of the new generation of Arabized and Mizrahi Jews who has decided to consciously adopt an Arab-Jewish identity and invest their energies into acquiring a culture that Israeli-Jewish society has decided to abandon. Behar's efforts are by no means part of the fictional Arab-Jewish identity that was invented somewhere in the late 1980s and the early 1990s mostly for the goals of identity politics.[90] "Anā min al-Yahūd" is an exceptional autobiographical meta-fictional Hebrew story with an Arabic title that might be a good illustration of the demise of Arab-Jewish cultural hybridity. The Arabic title of the Hebrew story is understandable for every Hebrew-speaking Israeli: The Arabic words correspond to the same Hebrew words, showing the common Semitic origins and the similarity of both languages. At the same time, the title shocks readers who are not used to Arabic titles for Hebrew literary works. The plot is somehow surrealist: as the narrator walks down the street in Jerusalem, he loses his Hebrew Israeli accent and begins to speak in the Arabic accent of his Iraqi-Arab-Jewish grandfather Anwar. This "return to his roots," which is accompanied by reviving the pre-1948 Palestinian reality in Jerusalem, only exacerbates the narrator's estrangement. The Jews suspect him of being an Arab, and the Arabs alienate themselves from him. Policemen start to head assertively toward him on the streets, stopping him and inquiring as to his name and identity. Because of the suspicion that he is not a Jew but an Arab, he wants to pull out his identity card before every passing policeman on the street and point out the nationality line and tell them: "*Anā min al-Yahūd, Anā min al-Yahūd*" ("I Am One of the Jews, I Am One of the Jews"). But the policemen take time to check him, going over his body with metal detectors, eager to defuse any suspicious object. Suddenly, explosive belts begin to form on his heart, "swelling and refusing to be defused, thundering and thundering." But at the same time, he is suffering from a sort of schizophrenia; the self-denial of his new situation reflects the tragedy of the demise of Arab-Jewish hybridity: "And my heart did not know I had returned to my heart, it didn't know, and my fears didn't know they had all returned to me, they did not know." Then this "plague" begins to strike other Israeli Jews, who also begin to speak in the accents of their

[90] See Reuven Snir, *Who Needs Arab-Jewish Identity? Interpellation, Exclusion, and Inessential Solidarities* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 225-226.

parents and grandparents. Upon the advice of his dead grandfather, the narrator chooses silence, only to discover that this too does not provide security, and again he is taken to jail. He starts to write stories and poems of opposition to Hebrew in Hebrew because he has no other language to write in. In his silence, he shows to his parents his writings, trying to convince them that his estrangement is a reflection of their alienation because "you too are the same exile, the same silence, the same alienation between heart and body and between thought and speech; perhaps you will know how the plot will be resolved." But his parents' response is a total denial: "This is not our son [...] we don't have this accent [...] his grandfather Anwar died before he was born." The last sentence of the story, a variation on the aforementioned sentence which reflects his schizophrenic situation, reflects the tragedy of the demise of Arab-Jewish hybridity: "And my parents did not know that I had returned to their heart, they did not know, and they did not know that all of their fears had returned to me, they did not know."

The reader is led to the conclusion that the estrangement of the narrator in Israeli society is due to some sort of historical blindness. The direct inter-textual allusion is to *Blindness* (1995) by the Portuguese writer José Saramago (1922-2010), in which a man suddenly loses his sight while he is waiting in his car at a traffic light. The mysterious epidemic of "white blindness" spreads to the whole nation. The novel ends when people start to regain their sight: "Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see."[91]

In Behar's story, too, initially one person is affected in one of his capacities, the capacity for speech, though he is not rendered mute but only loses his Hebrew accent and begins to speak in his grandfather's Iraqi accent. But, unlike Saramago's novel, which is full of hope, Behar's story is full of despair. The "plague" or the *dybbuk*—the return of the narrator to his Arab roots—is by no means the start of a revolution, but only "the last visit of health before death."

[91] José Saramago, *Blindness* (trans. Giovanni Pontiero) (London: Vintage, 2013), 309.

It is possible to compare Behar's story with novels detailing the immigrant experience, such as *My Antonia* (1918) by the American writer Willa Cather (1873-1947), *Bread Givers* (1925) by American-Jewish author Anzia Yezierska (1885-1970), and *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965) by the American author of Italian descent Mario Puzo (1920-1999). However, unlike these novels, which feature members of the younger generation as the driving force behind the adaptation to a new society and a different culture, and portray them as going against tradition, in Behar's story the young man rebels by going back to tradition. It is instructive, from both a literary and a symbolic point of view, to note the inter-textual links of Behar's story with "The Metamorphosis" (1915) by Franz Kafka (1883-1924), which also begins with the protagonist being inexplicably changed by some external force. Obviously, the stories do not exactly parallel each other—Kafka's protagonist, the hard-working Gregor, is turned into a bug and left alone by his family, while Behar's unnamed protagonist starts speaking with an accent and watches his "disease" spread all around him. Yet, the ending of both stories is one of rejection by those whom the protagonist loves most, and the changes that occur in the protagonists are not within their control. In a sense, both stories emphasize the same sort of despair and lack of hope for the future as illustrated, for example, by Samīr Naqqāsh's works, such as the novella "Prophecies of a Madman in a Cursed City."[92] Behar provides no real resolution, instead echoing in his final sentence the same ambiguity of identity that runs through Naqqāsh's work. Shortly before the story came out, Almog Behar published his poem "My Arabic Is Mute," which seems to be the nucleus of the story and at the same time encapsulates the demise of Arab-Jewish culture and identity:

הָעֲרָבִית שֶׁלִּי אִלֶּמֶת
חֲנוּקָה מִן הַגָּרוֹן
מְקַלְקֶלֶת אֶת עַצְמָהּ
בְּלִי לְהוֹצִיא מִלָּה
יְשֵׁנָה בָּאֲוִיר הַמַּחֲנִיק
שֶׁל מִקְלְטֵי נַפְשִׁי
מִסְתַּתֶּרֶת
מִבְּנֵי–הַמִּשְׁפָּחָה

[92] For a translation of the story, see Snir, *Arab-Jewish Literature*, 295-308.

מֵאֲחוֹרֵי תְּרִיסֵי הָעִבְרִית.
וְהָעִבְרִית שֶׁלִּי גּוֹעֶשֶׁת
מִתְרוֹצֶצֶת בֵּין הַחֲדָרִים
וּמַרְפְּסוֹת הַשְּׁכֵנִים
מַשְׁמִיעָה קוֹלָהּ בָּרַבִּים
מְנַבֵּאת בּוֹאָם שֶׁל אֱלֹהִים
וַדַּחְפּוֹרִים
וְאָז מִתְכַּנֶּסֶת בַּסָּלוֹן
חוֹשֶׁבֶת אֶת עַצְמָהּ
גְּלוּיוֹת עַל שְׂפַת עוֹרָהּ
כְּסוּיוֹת בֵּין דַּפֵּי בְּשָׂרָהּ
רָגַע עֵירֻמָּה וְרָגַע לְבוּשָׁה
הִיא מִצְטַמְצֶמֶת בַּכֶּרֶסָא
מְבַקֶּשֶׁת אֶת סְלִיחַת לִבָּהּ.
הָעֲרָבִית שֶׁלִּי פּוֹחֶדֶת
מִתְחַזָּה בְּשֶׁקֶט לְעִבְרִית
וְלוֹחֶשֶׁת לַחֲבֵרִים
עִם כָּל דְּפִיקָה בִּשְׁעָרֶיהָ:
"אַהְלָן! אהלן!"
וּמוּל כָּל שׁוֹטֵר עוֹבֵר בָּרְחוֹב
שׁוֹלֶפֶת תְּעוּדַת זֶהוּת
מַצְבִּיעָה עַל הַסְּעִיף הַמְּגוֹנָן:
"אֲנַא מִן אַל–יַהוּד, אֲנַא מִן אַל–יַהוּד".
וְהָעִבְרִית שֶׁלִּי חֵרֶשֶׁת
לִפְעָמִים חֵרֶשֶׁת מְאֹד.

My Arabic is mute
Strangled in the throat
Cursing itself
Without uttering a word
Sleeping in the suffocating air
Of the shelters of my soul
Hiding
From family members
Behind the shutters of Hebrew.
And my Hebrew erupts
Running around between rooms

And the neighbors' porches
Sounding her voice in public
Prophesizing the coming of God
And bulldozers
And then she settles in the living room
Thinking herself
Openly on the edge of her skin
Hidden between the pages of her flesh
One moment naked and the next dressed
She almost makes herself disappear in the armchair
Asking for her heart's forgiveness.
My Arabic is scared
Quietly impersonating Hebrew
Whispering to friends
With every knock on her gates:
"Welcome, welcome!"
And in front of every policeman on the street
She pulls out her ID card
Pointing out the protective clause:
"*Anā min al-Yahūd, Anā min al-Yahūd*" [I am one of the Jews, I am one of the Jews],
And my Hebrew is deaf
Sometimes so very deaf.[93]

Conclusion

The 1960s marked the beginning of the end for the Arabic literature of the Arab Jews: the majority of the writers who belonged to the Communist party left it after their faith in Communism was undermined following the exposure of Stalinist crimes, the border conflicts between the USSR and China, the increased radicalism

[93] The poem was first published in *Helicon - Anthological Journal of Contemporary Poetry* 68 (2005): 30.

within the Communist party in Israel and the USSR's blind support for the Arab states. On the other hand, having failed to create a "positive" and meaningful Arab culture, the governmental establishment gradually relinquished its support for those who had taken shelter in its shade. A few succeeded in adapting to writing in Hebrew, while others severed themselves from literary activity in Arabic. It was sad to observe those few who were unable to accept this reality, like the aforementioned writer Samīr Naqqāsh, who arrived in Israel at the age of thirteen and developed most of his talents there. With astounding devotion, he continued to write and publish Arabic novels, short stories and plays even when there was almost no one interested in his or his comrades' Arabic writings. Several years before his death, Naqqāsh expressed his tragic situation as an Arab-Jewish writer in the Israeli Zionist Western-oriented society in the following words: "I don't exist in this country, neither as a writer, citizen, or human being. I don't feel that I belong anywhere, not since my roots were torn from the ground [in Baghdad]."[94]

We can hardly find any example of the Ashkenazi establishment's attitude toward Arab-Jewish culture and identity that does not carry the "burden" of the previously mentioned cognitive dissonance. *Ha-Merkkaz le-Shilūv Moreshet Yahadūt Sepharad ve-ha-Mizraḥ* (The Center for the Integration of the Heritage of the Oriental and Sephardi Jewry), established in 1977 within the Ministry of Education, has been frequently cited to point out that the Israeli establishment is tolerant toward Arab-Jewish culture. However, its main orientation has been Zionist, and it has hardly dealt with contemporary Arabic literature by Jews at all.[95] As a result of the political and national Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East, on the one hand, and Israel's Western-oriented Ashkenazi cultural hegemony, on the other, the refusal inside Israel to tolerate any aspect of non-Zionist Arab culture is gaining a foothold in mainstream society and has become quite powerful. Israeli society, according to Yossi Ginosar (1945-2004), a former high official in the Israeli General Security Services (*Shabak*), "has not humanized Arab society yet [...] there

[94] Berg, *Exile from Exile*, 3.

[95] For an evaluation of the center's activities during the first twenty-five years of its existence, see the various contributions in the two special issues of *Pe'amim*: *Studies in Oriental Jewry*, namely, 92 (Summer 2002) and 93 (Autumn 2002).

is a deep abhorrence of its essential perspectives throughout Israeli social classes."[96] Recent signals of interest in Arab culture among Israeli-Jewish intellectuals have generally only been a theoretical tool in the discussion around the future of Israel in the Middle East. Literary Arabic writing by Jews will gradually disappear in the next few years. Paradoxically enough, even Jewish advocates of the inclusion of Arab culture as a fundamental component of Israeli society do not see this culture as part of their own cultural world; those among them who immigrated to Israel from Arab countries without becoming proficient in the standard Arabic language or who were not born in Arab countries do not, as a rule, bother with Arabic anymore. The fact that an Israeli-Jewish manager of a McDonald's fired a female Arab employee for "speaking Arabic to another Arab employee"[97] without arousing any public protest only serves to undercut the legal status of Arabic in Israel despite its being at the time an official language. The formal governmental seal on the demise of Arabic as a "Jewish language" was set by the "Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People," which stated the "The state's language is Hebrew." This law was passed by the Knesset in July 2018.

It is not too far-fetched to see Arabic literature by Jews as another victim of the conflict that has played out in Palestine, especially following the disappearance of the distinction between "Jew" and "Zionist" in Arab nationalist discourse and the attitude of the hegemonic Zionist narrative towards Arab culture. Since the early 1950s, the literature of twentieth-century Iraqi Jews produced in Arabic has entirely been relegated to the margins of Arabic literature. Political, national, and cultural reasons are behind that process and the paucity of scholarly attention that this literature has been given through the years. Although the literary writing of Iraqi Jews in the 1940s gained some attention among Jewish intellectuals in Palestine at the time,[98] since 1948 scholars outside Iraq have totally shunned the study of that literature. Now, unfortunately, only rarely do we hear Muslim and Christian authors and intellectuals regret the fact that the Jewish voice in Arab

[96] *Yedi'ot Aḥronot* (Saturday Supplement), January 9, 2004, 24.

[97] *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, March 10, 2004.

[98] See, for example, Y. Ben Hananya, "Jewish Writers and Poets in Iraq" (Hebrew), *Hed Ha-Mizrah*, September 29, 1943, 12; October 13, 1943, 6-7; October 29, 1943, 7; November 12, 1943, 6-7.

literature has been lost.[99] Moreover, most of them hardly know that such a voice ever existed. At the same time, the scholarship of Arabic literature has recently been experiencing vital changes that shed another light on Arab-Jewish culture, the basic component of which since the pre-Islamic period has been *literature*.

The rapid development and spread of Internet technologies has done much to change the way culture is perceived and has changed dramatically the way literature in general—Arabic literature included—is created and consumed. The impact of the Internet on Arabic literary writing has been gradually intensifying, and there are signs that Arabic literature is changing in many respects. Where the Internet is available (without strict governmental interventions), there is no censorship, no publishing limitations, no need for literary editors, and no need for financial resources to publish whatever you want. Also, the temporal distance between writing and publishing has now become shorter, if it still exists at all.[100] Consequently, the scholarship of Arabic literature has frequently been moving into non-academic spaces without sticking to unbiased academic discourse, and sometimes it has turned into a discourse directed by unrelated ideological, political, and social motives. For example, those scholars who insist that Jewish-Arab identity still exists and that the relevant culture is flourishing among Jews in Israel today do not act as impartial academics but adopt post-truth populist strategies, which have unfortunately recently penetrated academic circles as well,

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[99] The Lebanese writer and critic Ilyās Khūrī (Elias Khoury) (b. 1948) considers the "Jewish-Arab voice" a central voice in Arab culture; therefore, its loss has been a severe blow to that culture (interview with Anton Shammās in *Yediot Aḥronoth*, March 15, 2002, 60. See the Arabic version of the interview *Mashārif* [Haifa] 17 [Summer 2002], 237-238). It is ironic that, about six years earlier, Khūrī himself threatened to walk out of the hall during a conference on Arabic literature in Carthage (Tunis) when the Israeli writer Sami Michael, himself an Arab-Jew in origin, was ready to come up on the stage to give his lecture. Michael's anger was expressed in his essay "Shylock in Carthage," *The Jewish Quarterly*, Winter 1994-1995: 71-72. Under the title "The Experience of Oriental Jews in Israel: Have We Lost for Ever the Jews of Iraq?" The Jordanian writer Ibrāhīm Gharāyiba (b. 1962) laments the failure of the Arabs to keep the Arab-Jews, especially the Iraqis among them, as an integral part of Arab society and culture (*al-Ḥayāt*, July 25, 2002, 25). His article appeared in English translation in *The Scribe*, the journal of Babylonian Jewry published by the Jewish Exilarch's Foundation in London, volume 72 (September 1999), 25. However, the translation omits some sentences in which the writer argues that said failure has only served the Israeli and Zionist aggression against Arabs.

[100] See Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 274-275.

as it happens when scientific discourse turns to emotions in order to support perceptions that are scientifically unsubstantiated. Two examples will suffice here: the first is the publication of a special issue of the *Ho! - Literary Magazine* (March 16, 2018) with the title "Arabic Literature and Yiddish Literature: Modern Hebrew Culture's Two Sisters." Unlike the Yiddish section in the volume, the Arabic one, despite the huge energy invested in it by the editors, illustrates in its poor scholarly foundation the demise of Arabic culture among Jews, and I hope to discuss this volume in more detail in a future review essay. The second example is the controversy surrounding Arab-Jewish identity that has emerged among a research group known as "Jewish Life in Modern Islamic Contexts," which convened during the 2018-2019 academic year at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies in Philadelphia, a controversy about which I have already written in detail.[101]

[101] See my essay "Arab-Jewish Identity: For a Long Time, There Has Been No Such Thing," published in *Ha'aretz*, April 10, 2019. Four of the fellows at the group, Yoram Meital, Orit Bashkin, Nancy Berg, and Yoval Evri, responded in their essay "Arab-Jewish Identity: There Is Certainly Such a Thing," published in *Ha'aretz*, May 25, 2019. The response, to say the least, basically uses fallacious straw-man arguments, attributing to me distorted weaker arguments and misrepresenting my positions, only to "successfully" defeat them. Strangely, one of the authors, Orit Bashkin, published in 2017 a book whose conclusion, entitled "The Death of Arab Jewishness," contradicts the content of their article (Orit Bashkin, *Impossible Exodus: Iraqi Jews in Israel* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017], 221-229). For my detailed response to their essay, see Reuven Snir, "Who Needs Arab-Jewish Identity? On Politics of Identity, Social Capital, and Academic Ethics" (Hebrew), *Jama'a - Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (2020): 317-352. By no means I overlook the multiplicity of popular manifestations of Arab-Jewish and Mizrahi identities and oriental musical traditions (*Musica Mizraḥīt*) as expressed, for example, in the studies of the poet and scholar Haviva Pedaya (b. 1957) such as *Ha-Mizraḥ Kotev Et 'Atzmo* (The Mizrah Writes Itself) (Tel Aviv: Gama Press and Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 2015); and *Shivato shel Ha-Kol Ha-Goleh: Zehut Mizraḥīt, Po'etika, Muzika U-Merchav* (Return of the Lost Voice: Poetics, Music and Space) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uḥad, 2016). See also Motti Regev, "*Musica Mizrakhit*, Israeli Rock and National Culture in Israel," *Popular Music* 15, no.3 (1996): 275-284; Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 191-235; and Yochai Oppenheimer, *Ma Ze li-Hiyot Otenti - Shira Mizraḥīt be-Yisrael* (What Is to Be Authentic - Mizrahi Poetry in Israel) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012). Also, it goes without saying that my arguments have nothing to do with issues of the civil rights struggle as expressed, for example, in Bryan K. Roby, *The Mizrahi Era of Rebellion: Israel's Forgotten Civil Rights Struggle 1948-1966* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015). In addition, my arguments do not deal with the linguistic interactions between Hebrew and Arabic within the intensely politicized space of Israel/Palestine and the relationship through literature between Jewish and Palestinian authors as discussed in Lital Levy, *Poetic Trespass: Writing Between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

We are currently witnessing the demise of Arab-Jewish culture—a tradition that started more than 1,500 years ago is vanishing before our very eyes. The main factor in the Muslim-Christian-Jewish Arab symbiosis up to the twentieth century, from the Jewish point of view, was that the great majority of the Jews under the rule of Islam had adopted Arabic as their spoken language. Yet Arabic is gradually disappearing as a language spoken on a daily basis by Jews. The image of an hourglass is an opposite one for the magnitude of cultural loss: the grains of sand are quickly running out. Furthermore, in the field of literature there is not even one Jewish writer of record who was born in Israel after 1948 and is still writing in Arabic. A Jew who is now fluent in Arabic must have either been born in an Arab country (and their numbers, of course, are rapidly decreasing) or have acquired the language as part of his training for service in the military or security services (and their numbers, needless to say, are always increasing). The Israeli-Jewish canonical elite does not see the Arabic language and culture as intellectual assets—there is no better illustration of this point than the structure of the comparative literature departments at Israeli universities, where one can hardly find tenured scholars with knowledge of Arabic or its literature. In short, we all know that the chapter of Arab-Jewish symbiosis has reached its end, and that the hourglass will not be turned over anytime soon, if at all.[102] The great Arab poet Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī (915-965), one of the Arab-Jewish authors' favorite poets from the golden age of Arabic poetry, had already said:

مَا كلُّ ما يَتَمَنّى المَرْءُ يُدْرِكُهُ تجرِي الرّياحُ بمَا لا تَشْتَهي السّفُنُ

A man can never gain everything he hopes for,
The winds blow contrary to what ships wish.[103]

University Press, 2014).

[102] On the demise of Arab-Jewish culture and identity, see Snir, *Who Needs Arab-Jewish Identity*, especially, the conclusion 219-228.

[103] Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī, *Dīwān al-Mutanabbī* (The Poetry Collection of al-Mutanabbī) (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Thaqāfiyya, n.d.), 472.

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Keywords: Arab-Jewish culture, Iraqi Jews, Shimon Ballas, Sammy Michael, Elī ʻAmīr

How to quote this article:
Reuven Snir, " 'My Arabic Is Mute': The Demise of Arabic Literature by Iraqi Jews and Their Shift to Writing in Hebrew," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 19 (June 2021), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037–741X/12685