



“These Hearts, Can They Reach Tranquility?”: Arabic Poetry by Jews During the 1950s

"Esses corações, podem eles alcançar tranquilidade?": Poesia Árabe por Judeus durante os anos 1950.

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Abstract: The article examines the Arabic literary poetry written by Iraqi Jews in Israel during the 1950s after their immigration from Iraq. This temporal revival of Arabic poetry by Jews was the swan song of the Arab-Jewish culture as we are currently witnessing its demise— 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 adopted Arabic as their language; now Arabic is gradually disappearing as a language mastered by Jews.

Keywords: David Semah. Arab-Jewish culture. Iraqi Jews.

Resumo: O artigo examina a poesia literária árabe escrita por judeus iraquianos em Israel durante a década de 1950, após sua imigração do Iraque. Esse renascimento temporal da poesia árabe pelos judeus foi o canto do cisne da cultura árabe-judaica, enquanto se testemunha o seu desaparecimento - uma tradição que começou há mais de 1.500 anos está desaparecendo diante de nossos olhos. Até o século XX, a grande maioria dos judeus sob o domínio do Islã adotou o árabe como língua; agora o árabe está gradualmente desaparecendo como uma língua dominada pelos judeus.

Palavras-chave: David Semah. Cultura árabe-judaica. Judeus iraquianos.

Introduction

There were already Jewish poets in the pre-Islamic period as well as after Islam appeared; in Muslim Spain (Al-Andalus) in the 11th-13th century we find even Jewish authors so at home in *fusha* (standard literary Arabic) that they were able to achieve wide recognition for their literary works.² But since the mid-13th century, Jews were nowhere as open to participation in the wider Arabic culture, and at home in *fusha*, as from the 1920s in Iraq.³ This cultural involvement was encouraged by the process of modernization and secularization of the Iraqi Jews since the second half of 19th century. However, because of the escalation of the Arab-Jewish conflict over Palestine

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² STERN, 1963, p. 254-263.

³ On the historical background of the Jews in Iraq, see REJWAN, 1985.



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 the Jews no alternative but to immigrate to Israel. Moreover, since the 1950s the Arab-Jews have been gradually deliberately excluded from Arabness to the point that we can speak now about a kind of unspoken agreement between Zionism and Arab nationalism to perform a total cleansing of Arab-Jewish culture. The national struggle over Palestine has by no means hindered 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 rule of Islam adopted Arabic as their language; now Arabic is gradually disappearing as a language mastered by Jews.

The present article examines the insistence of Iraqi-Jews immigrating to Israel during the 1950s to continue their Arabic literary activities despite the reluctance of the two clashing national movements to keep Arab-Jewish identity alive.

1 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 among them: Murād Mikhā'il (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 (b. 1927), Ishāq 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), David Semah (1933-1997), Sasson Somekh (1933-2019), Shmuel Moreh (1933-2017), and Samīr Naqqāsh (1938-2004). The harsh material conditions in the new Jewish state, the difficulties of adapting to a new society and a lack of knowledge of Hebrew took their toll on most of them. They underwent an “experience of shock and uprooting,” as Somekh says, and under these conditions “it became difficult to think about literature.”⁴ Nevertheless, and in spite of the difficulties in adapting to the new and fundamentally different Hebrew-Jewish society, the fact that they arrived to a state where Arabic was considered official language, apart from Hebrew, gave them, at least in the beginning the hope that they would be able to continue their literary careers. Also, following the events of 1948, the greater part of the Palestinian Arab urban intelligentsia abandoned the territories of Palestine, while those who remained inside the boundaries of the State

⁴ *Iton* 77, January-February 1988, p. 32.



of Israel were generally from the poorer or the uneducated village population. This cultural vacuum was partially filled by the immigrating Jewish writers and poets. And indeed, not a few of the Arab-Jewish immigrants continued to create literature in Arabic, while adhering to the poetics they had grown accustomed to in Iraq, which was suffused with English and French influence. A significant thematic change appeared in their work: alongside the conventional subjects which had preoccupied them in Iraq — love, social and ethical problems, the status of woman, fate and its illusions, death and thoughts on life — subjects touching on the pressing social and political circumstances of the new society became dominant in their work. Furthermore, as far as concerned Arabic writing by Jews in Israel, those works which dealt with traditional themes were marginal. It was precisely its preoccupation with issues of urgency which granted importance, however limited, to Jewish writing in Arabic during these years.

Following the efforts of the Israeli Establishment to paint Jewish immigration from the Arab world in Zionist colors,⁵ Arab-Jewish intellectuals with split personalities had to cope with the new situation. Many hastened to present themselves as Zionist while referring to their Arab identity as a mark of disgrace. Israeli patriotism quickly permeated the writing of most of the immigrant authors and poets, but for some, the emigration to a new society did not bring a total change in their fundamental world views. Others underwent a process of growing identification with the Establishment, largely a result of the change in their status in a Jewish state, the reverse of their status in Iraq as a minority within an Arab majority. Characterizing the writing of the poets who immigrated to Israel as opposed to those who remained in Iraq, the aforementioned poet and scholar Shmuel Moreh says that the Iraqi-Jewish poets who immigrated to Israel wrote poetry 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, 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 It is more correct to say however that the emigration to Israel, which many undertook unwillingly and as a result of a physical threat to their lives in Iraq, shifted their allegiance from Iraqi patriotism to loyalty to the new Jewish state. Furthermore, the generalization that the

⁵ An example is the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center in Or-Yehuda (BJHC) founded in 1972; its museum opened 16 years later has adopted the memorialization practices used in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’s and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, Israel’s national Holocaust memorial. On the success of BJHC and its museum to present the history of Iraqi Jewry as integral part of the Zionist narrative, see MEIR-GLITZENSTEIN, 2002, p. 165-186.

⁶ MOREH, 1981 (English introduction), p. 23.



writing of those remained in Iraq became pessimistic and melancholy apparently derives from a projection of their wretched ends onto their feelings in the past.

Having internalized the negative attitude of the canonical cultural center to 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 youth growing up in Arab-Jewish families was very apparent. Trying to conform to the Sabra (a native-born Israeli Jew) norm, children were made to feel ashamed of the Arabness of their parents. In his autobiographical story, "Pictures from the Elementary School,"⁷ 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."⁸ the Iraqi born Yehuda Shenhav, a Tel Aviv University professor and one of the activists of *Ha-Keshet Ha-Demokratit Ha-Mizrahit* (The Oriental Democratic Spectrum),⁹ described his own experience:

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.¹⁰

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: those who preferred to be active under the aegis of the Establishment and those who joined the Communist Party or expressed sympathy with 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 establishing literary prizes and literary competitions, as well as through the founding of the Arab Book Fund.¹¹ Those literary and cultural activities dealt with the yearning for peace and "Arab-Jewish

⁷ SHAMOSH, 1979, p. 79-87.

⁸ *Yediot Ahronoth*, 7 Days, 8 August 2003, p. 54.

⁹ On this movement, see CHETRIT, 2004, p. 290-295.

¹⁰ 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 SHENHAV, 2003.

¹¹ See, for example, *Fī Mahrajān al-Adab* (In the Festival of Literature) (AGGASSI, 1959). It was published by the Arab Book Fund and contained works that earned prizes in a literary competition put on by the Histadrūt in 1958. The introduction of the book by the Iraqi Jew Iliyāhū Aghāsī (Eliyahu Aggassi) (1909-1991) illustrates the efforts to produce "positive" culture.



brotherhood,”¹² but avoided dealing with controversial problems such as the government’s policy toward the Arab-Palestinian minority and the way Jews from Arab lands were absorbed into Israel. 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, whose intellectuals had not abandoned Israel following 1948. The Establishment’s ban on Communist writers, Jews and Arabs, inspired the “Association of Arabic Language Poets” to refuse to collaborate with them.¹³ The journals of the two camps were fiercely competitive, but the Communist journals stood out, particularly *al-Ittihād* (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 subjects considered taboo by the governmental press, which the Arab public perceived as the trumpet of the ruling party, even attributing to it hatred of Arabs. In contrast to those writers who were supported by the Establishment, a preoccupation with political and social problems was dominant in Communist writing. Besides this thematic difference, it was possible to discern, in their poetry, a significant formal difference: while those writers close to the Establishment in general clung strictly to conservative Arabic poetics, the Communists were already inclined, in the early 1950s, toward the modernism of “free verse,” despite the fact that this new poetics had hardly been digested by the Palestinian Arab poets in Israel. The Jewish poets had already absorbed this poetics in Iraq, where it had first flourished, and where it was also identified with Communist writers.

2 “In the World of Light”: The Establishment’s Inspired Poetry

The work of the writers and poets close to the Establishment was steeped in national pride and permeated with Zionist patriotism and the desire for peace while absent any critique of the government. One of the prominent figures among them was the poet and jurist Salīm Sha’shū’a, whose volume of poetry *Fī ‘Ālam al-Nūr* (In the World of Light, 1959) represents these writers well. The book’s title reflects the character of the poems, which praise the exodus from the darkness of 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 in these poems, not even allusive or any protest of social, economic or political conditions. Notwithstanding the

¹² While in Iraq, Arab cultural and national identity encompassed Jews side by side with Muslims and Christians; in Israel, since the 1950s, the Jewish identity has become in itself a cultural and national identity. Thus, because of the political conflict, the natural Iraqi hybrid Arab-Jewish identity turned into a sharp dichotomy of Jewish versus Arab.

¹³ See *al-Jadīd*, December 1955, p. 40-43.



difficult travails of absorption of the new immigrants, and the severe problems of the local minority, the poet depicts an idyllic picture of a paradise on earth. This gave the book's critics their pretext for a scathing critique.¹⁴ Its national patriotism is expressed also in the dedication of the volume to the President of the State of Israel, Yitzḥak Ben Zvi (1884-1963), whose picture figures alongside the dedication, above the following verses:

من لآلي الشعر يا مولاي قد صنعت عقودا
وبها رصّعت تاريخا 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,
Behold the bounty of my feeling, transformed to poetry by love.

Thus Sha'shū'a conforms to the custom of the medieval Arab court poets, who glorified and praised their patrons. Like one who felt the rush of History's wings above his head, the poet composed a rhetorical introduction to the volume. As there is no better way to characterize this type of writing from these years, it is important to quote it in full:

أخي القارئ الكريم!
في هذه البلاد حيث تكّد الأيدي، وتجدّ العقول، وتتفتّق الأذهان، في هذه البلاد حيث تنبثق الفكر كالأشعة، فتتألق الخواطر كالأهلة، وتسمق شجرة المعرفة، وتعيق الحكمة، وتتطلق الروحانية. يلتقي الشرق بالغرب، فتتجسّم الفكرة بالصورة، ويخترع الغرب ويبتدع الشرق، دنيا جديدة شيقّة. ويطلع فجر وتشرق شمس وتتدفّق أضواء في عالم النور. في هذه الدنيا حيث ترتفع المصانع، وتصطخبا لمعامل، ويتصاعد الدخان وتفوح البخور. في هذه الدنيا الجديدة، حيث الجنائن الغلب والحدائق الغنّ التي كانت قبل عقد من الزمن، صحارى قاحلة، يقف الإنسان اليوم معجبا بأخيه الإنسان. الإنسان الذي يزرع. الإنسان الذي يبني. الإنسان الذي يفكر. هذا الإنسان الذي لم تعقه الطبيعة دون الذي يريده، تجده هنا في إسرائيل يعمل وينتج، حيث يخلق القلم وتتفنّن الريشة ويبدع الإزميل! وقفت أنصت وملء عينيّ هذا الجمال، في البطاح، في الروابي وفي الوديان. جمال الأرض الطيبة! وجمال الأيدي المنتجة! وجمال العقول المبدعة! هذا الجمال أحسّه كلّما تأملت وحيثما تملّيت، فلا عجب إذا أسئلهمه قصائدي مختارا أو غير مختار، قصائد كتبتها في عالم النور، وأنا أسير في قافلة الأخوة العربية اليهودية المناضلة من أجل السلام والمحبة بين شعبينا العربي والعبري الساميين. هذه القصائد بين يديك، لعلّك أن تجد فيها ما تقرأه وما تعجبه وما يحبّب لك هذه الأخوة التي تنبثق من ربوع إسرائيل. وغابتي — كل غابتي — أن نكتسح — أنا وأنت — الأشواك التي قد تقف في طريق أخوتنا المسالمة، لنعيش معا في عالم النور.

My brother the Reader!

In this land in which hands labour, 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 alxuctor) makes wonders! I stood and

¹⁴ See, for example, *al-Jadīd*, July 1958, p. 23-24.



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 which 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.¹⁵

Beautiful phrases 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 Israeli society. Sha'shū'a is satisfied with a vague reference to the thorns which "may perhaps (*sic!*) stand in the path of our brotherhood and pursuit of peace." The same patriotic tone characterizes the poems of this volume as well as we find in the introductory poem.¹⁶ Written for an Independence Day celebration in the 1950s, this poem bears the title "Victory is Among Its Followers," based on the following words:

قدم الربيع مهتأنا بقدومه [...]]...[
شعبا يقود النصر حيث يريد
فالنصر من أتباعه وجنوده

Spring has come saluting in its arrival [...]
A people who leads victory to every place it wishes:
Victory is among its followers and one of its soldiers.

The Israeli Forces reap only victories because victory is one of their soldiers. In this poem, which draws an analogy between the spring and human happiness,¹⁷ the Jews return to their ancestral inheritance and make the desert bloom with the aid of the divine light, Torah and Talmud. Nonetheless, the poem is not militaristic, as its ultimate goal is peace and co-existence between Jews and Arabs. In another poem, "Cooperation," which the poet recited at the first national conference of the cooperative association convened by the Arabic Department of the Histadrūt in Nazareth on 1 October 1958, the poet says:

إننا سنبنني بالتعاون عالما
والسلم يصبح غاية في ذاته
ألخير من أهدافه والعدل من
أوصافه والحب من آياته

¹⁵ SHA'SHŪ'A, 1959, p. 7-8.

¹⁶ SHA'SHŪ'A, 1959, p. 9-13.

¹⁷ Cf. "The Spring in Israel" (SHA'SHŪ'A, 1959, p. 44-48).



Through cooperation, we shall yet build a world
Whose purpose is peace,
Whose goals count goodness among them, whose plans
Include justice, and whose signs include love.¹⁸

The poet continued to explore these same motifs and ideas through his later work, as we see in the collection *Ughniyyāt li-Bilādī* (Songs to My Homeland, 1976). It is most noteworthy that the yearning for peace is one of the most striking characteristics of the Iraqi-Jewish poets in the 1950s. Thus, for instance, the poet Sālīm al-Kātīb says in a poem dedicated to “the mothers of the world, to the mothers of Israel, to my mother”:

أين السّلام، يا أمّاه
أين السّكون؟!!

ما أبهى شعبنا يا أمّاه
والشّعوب
لو احتضنه الهدوء
وفي سمانها الصّافية الزّرقاء
رفرفت طيور السّلام

Where is peace, woe my mother?
Where is tranquility?!

How glorious our people would be
And all peoples
If tranquility would envelope them
And in their clear blue skies
The doves of peace would flutter¹⁹

In the poem “Peace and the Dawn,” written in December 1951 and dedicated “to humanity which yearns for light and for peace,” the same poet says:

الدّيك يصيح
والفجر الجميل
يأبى النّزوح
لكنّه يزول
مع موكب الصّبح
ولحنه الشّادي
"الحن السّلام"
يأبى أن يزول

The rooster cries
And the beautiful dawn
Refuses to vanish
But it melts
With the oncoming morning

¹⁸ SHA'SHŪ'A, 1959, p. 18.

¹⁹ AL-KĀTIB, 1959, p. 52-53.



Still its sweet melody,
The melody of peace,
Refuses to vanish.²⁰

Even the harshest critics of this poetry did not ignore the “yearning for peace and human brotherhood”²¹ with which it was anointed. For many of the Jewish writers, Israel symbolized the focal point of peace and brotherhood:

وطني
عرين العدل،
مأوى الحق،
سوق البرّ
بند السلم صدر بنوده

My homeland
Pasture of peace
Shelter of truth
Market of justice
The banner of peace at the head of its banners.²²

The works of those close to the Establishment were characterized by an emphasis on Jewish-Arab brotherhood, the yearning for peace and praise for the accomplishments of the State “whose flowering land is flowing with milk and honey.”²³ Not a drop of criticism against the authorities was heard.

3 “Till Spring Comes”: The Communist Poets

The leftist poets and writers who emigrated from Iraq did not agree that Israeli patriotism implied absolute identification with the authorities. This was so despite their awareness that anti-Establishment activity might harm not only their chances for integration into Israeli society but also their income, and even their livelihoods.²⁴ The argument that literary anti-Establishment activity derived only from bitterness over harsh living conditions in Israel is difficult to accept. The Jewish Communist writers arrived in Israel with an ideology already formed. In Iraq, as in other Middle Eastern states,²⁵ Jewish intellectuals after the Second World War inclined to either Communism or Zionism. With the outbreak of the war, the Communist underground

²⁰ AL-KĀTIB, 1959, p. 62-63.

²¹ See *al-Jadīd*, December 1958, p. 42-43.

²² SHA‘SHŪ‘A, 1976, p. 63.

²³ From a poem by Zakkai Binyamin (Aharon Zakkai), which earned him the third prize in the 1958 competition (AGGASSI, 1959, p. 106-107).

²⁴ See Ballas story in *al-Jadīd*, December 1955, pp. 26-34. Cf. *Maariv*, April 25, 1989, p. B9. On the opportunism of others, see Sammy Michael’s story in *al-Jadīd*, February 1955, pp. 24-29; and Semah’s letter in *Maariv*, 26 January 1989.

²⁵ Cf. MEMMI, 1966, p. 167.



in Iraq strengthened, and Jews joined it “out of feelings of Iraqi patriotism”²⁶ and the belief that Communism was the only force capable of withstanding Nazism. “From a small, childish, one-dimensional framework,” this grew in strength to “a tidal wave.”²⁷ The underground struggled not only against the corrupt, dictatorial Iraqi regime and for equal rights for all minorities, but also against Zionism. Several of its Jewish members even founded in Baghdad, in 1946, the magazine *al-Uṣba* (The League), the magazine of the Iraqi ‘Uṣbat Mukāfaḥat al-Ṣihyūniyya (The League for the Struggle against Zionism). Opposition to Zionism was not exclusive to Communist Jews, but extended also to the Jewish community institutions and their leaders, including the dispatching of an anti-Zionist telegram to the League of Nations from the general council of the Iraqi Jewish community.²⁸ Still, it is possible that there were also those, particularly among the youth, who saw no real contradiction between Zionism and Communism as liberation movements acting against British occupation.²⁹

Immigration to Israel did not chill the fervor of the Iraqi-Jewish Communist writers for this ideology: thus, for instance, Sammy Michael, persecuted as a Communist in Iraq, fled to Iran and from there to Israel, with no Zionist motives whatsoever.³⁰ His world view found expression not only in his participation on the editorial board of the Communist journal, *al-Ittiḥād*, but in his literary work as well. Michael’s works, published under the pen name “Samīr Mārid” (literally, “Samīr [is] a rebel”) emphasized social and national injustice, supported the battle against the bourgeoisie and praised Communism.³¹ These ideas were also expressed in his later Hebrew works, such as his novels *Ḥasūt* (Shelter, 1977) and *Ḥofen shel ‘Arafel* (A Handful of Fog, 1979). Shimon Ballas’ case is similar: he joined the Communist party as an Iraqi patriot while still a student and his immigration to Israel was “of necessity, not ideology,” as until his death he was never a Zionist.³² In Iraq, he followed conditions in Israel by reading the European and American press while serving as the aide of the Iraqi Jewish senator Ezra Ben Menaḥem Daniel (1874-1952). In Israel, he joined the Party and

²⁶ Semah’s letter in *Maarivo*, 26 January 1989.

²⁷ According to Sammy Michael (*Ba-Maḥane*, March 22, 1989, p. 23). On Jewish Communist activity in Iraq, see BATATU, 1978, p. 650-651, 699-701, 1190-1192.

²⁸ According to Shalom Darwīsh who composed the telegram (YEHUDAH, 1980, pp. 82-85).

²⁹ Conversations with Semah (2 May, 6 and 14 June 1989).

³⁰ *Ba-Maḥane*, 22 March 1989, p. 23. See also *Moznaim*, July-August 1986, p. 16. On the way of life in the underground in Iraq, see his novel *Ḥofen shel ‘Arafel* (A Handful of Fog, 1979).

³¹ See, for example, his story “Muḥarrir Aūrūba” (The Liberator of Europe) in *al-Ittiḥād*, monthly supplement, vol. 9, No. 1 (49), pp. 17-27. See also his story “Fī Ziḥām al-Madīna” (In the Tumult of the City) (*al-Jadīd*, November 1955, p. 26-29).

³² *Maarivo*, 25 April 1989, p. B9.



published in its journals in Arabic under the pen name Adīb al-Qāṣṣ (literally, “Adīb [Man of Letters] the storyteller”).³³

In contrast to the Establishment writers, these writers and poets devoted all their literary energies to intellectual struggle, focusing their attention on three central concerns: the manner in which new Jewish immigrants were absorbed; the inequality between the Oriental Jews and the Ashkenazi residents; and the fate of the Arab-Palestinian minority. The manner in which new immigrants were absorbed was a searing insult to these writers. Even the passage of time would not let them forget how a new culture and values were imposed on them while their pasts were derided,³⁴ and in this context their Party activity was a means to an end — a change in this condition. Later, this sense of insult was even expressed by those who did not hold leftist views, as we find with the writer Eli ‘Amir (b. 1938), the author of *Tarnegol Kapparot* (Scapegoat, 1983). ‘Amir focuses this sense in the dwarfing of the father figure in the eyes of his children, which “brings you to want revenge.”³⁵ Social protest, touching on relations within Jewish society, comes to more prominent expression in the Hebrew works of these writers of a later period, and especially in the novel.

By formulating their literary protest on the national question in Arabic, the Communist writers assisted their Palestinian colleagues in whose work this issue was central. These Jewish writers attempted to imply: let us not do to the Palestinians, especially as they are a minority in our midst what the Muslims did to the Jewish minority in the land of the Tigris and Euphrates; let us stand alongside them as did those Arabs who stood beside us in our most difficult hours in Iraq.³⁶ The literary activity of two young writers of the same age, the aforementioned Sasson Somekh and David Semah, represents this facet of anti-Establishment writing in the 1950s. Somekh immigrated to Israel in 1951 after graduating from the Shammāsh School without knowing Hebrew at all.³⁷ He had already published in Iraq and in Israel he continued to do so in Communist and other journals, such as the monthly *al-Fajr* (The Dawn) of Mapam. He even had a cultural column, called “Tel Aviv Letter” in the Communist *al-Jadīd*. At the same time, he translated poetry, mastered Hebrew and was one of the first to reconcile himself to the advantage of writing in Hebrew. Semah also immigrated to Israel in 1951 after completing his studies at the Alliance school in Baghdad without knowing Hebrew. He began publishing in Arabic in the Communist press and in 1959 his first

³³ Conversation with Ballas (14 June 1989). His novel *Heder Na’ūl* (A Locked Room) (BALLAS 1980) describes the way of life among members of the Communist press in Israel.

³⁴ See Ballas’ words in *Maariv*, 25 April 1989, p. B9.

³⁵ *Ha’aretz*, 8 February 1985, p. 16; and *Maariv*, 25 April 1989, p. B9.

³⁶ See even in the 1980’s a letter of Jewish reader titled: “A Call to My Jewish Brothers of Iraqi Origin” (*al-Ittihād*, 2 June 1986, p. 5).

³⁷ *Moznaim*, October-November 1983, p. 49; *Iton* 77, January-February 1988, p. 32.



volume of poetry, which aroused great interest in leftist Arabic literary circles in Israel, appeared.³⁸ While still in their twenties, the two poets responded to *al-Jadīd*'s call to encourage local Arabic literature by founding the "Club of the Friends of Arabic Literature in Israel," which later became the "Hebrew-Arabic Literary Club."³⁹ This club, whose activity encompassed the transit and immigrant camps as well, set itself the goal of becoming a "bridge between Hebrew and Arabic literatures" while working for mutual understanding "despite the borders of bloodletting."⁴⁰ Not without hesitation regarding the fundamental dilemmas of literary language and target audience,⁴¹ the club helped to bring the Arabic reading public in Israel news of what was happening in Arabic, Hebrew, and world literature, as well as specific topics from Arab history.⁴² The social and cultural work of Somekh, Semah, and their colleagues was characterized by protest against the Israeli Establishment, and for equal rights and social justice. This protest also found expression in solidarity gatherings.⁴³ The impulse to their literary activism was not party politics, but rather, in Somekh's words, "a spontaneous inclination toward the brotherhood of peoples," which in turn characterized the activity of the Communist Party, "the only party shared by both Arabs and Jews."⁴⁴ Their work was a sensitive seismic register of the Arab-Palestinian minority sentiments in Israel, 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 poems to be written about the massacre of scores of innocent men

³⁸ Conversations with Semah (2 May, and 6 and 14 June 1989). See also *al-Jadīd*, February 1959, p. 20; March 1959, p. 45, 55.

³⁹ See *al-Jadīd*, March 1954, pp. 54-55. On the club's activities, see *al-Jadīd*, January 1956, p. 54; February 1956, p. 16.

⁴⁰ *Al-Jadīd*, November 1954, p. 45. Cf. *al-Jadīd*, February 1956, p. 16. See also Somekh's words in *al-Anbā'* (weekly supplement), 10 December 1982, p. 4.

⁴¹ See, for example, *al-Jadīd*, November 1954, p. 45-46, and also Somekh's words in *Iton 77*, January-February 1988, p. 32 as well as Sammy Michael in *Yediot Ahronoth*, 15 February 1985, p. 20; and *Iton 77*, July-August 1985, p. 50.

⁴² See, for example, in *al-Jadīd*: Semah's articles in April 1956, pp. 6-10; January 1959, pp. 22-27; November 1959, pp. 27-32 as well as Ballas' surveys in January 1956, pp. 16-18; March 1956, pp. 23-26; and translation of poetry by Semah in February 1956, p. 14; and Sammy Michael's article in December 1955, p. 35-39.

⁴³ Such as, for example, Semah's participation in the solidarity gathering with the Algerian people (*al-Jadīd*, April 1958, pp. 51-55). The poems he recited there are included in his collection (SEMAH, 1959, p. 13-16, 49-50).

⁴⁴ *Iton 77*, January-February 1988, p. 33; conversations with Semah (2 May, and 6 and 14 June 1989).



and women at Kafr Qasim on 29 October 1956.⁴⁵ As with the Jewish Hebrew poet Saul Tchernichovski's (1875-1943) poem, "The Rabbi's Daughter and Her Mother,"⁴⁶ the Semah chose to represent the tragic events in the form of a dialogue between a mother and her daughter on the father who was murdered. The girl does not understand why her father has not returned:

لقد كدت أنساه! ما لونه
أتلع من لهفة عينه؟
أراح يحلق فوق الغيوم
ويبحث عن ساطعات النجوم
لينظم عقدا بطوق جبدي
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 also with a bit of money to redeem the wretched family. The poet ties the national woe of the local minority to its social and economic woes, as the death of the family patriarch, caused only by his being Arab, has brought the family to the threshold of hunger and caused a deterioration in the condition of the ailing daughter. Slowly the certainty of the father's return that the mother displays to her daughter is undermined. It becomes clear that he was killed after leaving for work without a permit, an allusion to the restrictions endured by the Palestinian population in Israel of the 1950s. The daughter herself, who becomes aware of the circumstances of his death from the whispering of the neighbours' 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 a vision of sweeping revolution:

تقرب يوم الصّراع
فقد هبّت العاصفة
على الكون حانقة جارفة
تطوح بالظلم والظالمين

⁴⁵ It was completed, according to Semah, approximately two weeks after the massacre. The poem was published for the first time in *al-Ittihād*, 31 December 1956 and was included latter with slight revisions in SEMAH, 1959, pp. 41-45). In January 1957, *al-Jadīd* published literary reactions to the massacre, among them a poem by the Palestinian poet Tawfiq Zayyād (1932-1994) which he claimed to have been written on 3 November 1956.

⁴⁶ TCHERNICHOVSKI, 1950, p. 736-737. Semah was then very fond of his poetry much more than the poetry of Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934) (conversations with Semah 2 May, and 6 and 14 June 1989).



وبالسَّارِقِينَ طَعَامَ الْجِيَاعِ
وبالسَّجْنَ تَذْهَبَ وَالسَّاجِنَ
وبالسَّالْبِينَ حَلِيبَ الرِّضَاعِ
وبالسَّافِكِينَ الدِّمَاءِ
لَتَنْقُذَ أَطْمَاعَهُمْ مِنْ ضِيَاعِ
فَشَدُّوا الْقَوَى أَيُّهَا الْكَادِحُونَ
فَلَيْسَ لَكُمْ مَا تَخْسِرُونَ

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 it 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 Marx and Engels’ Communist Manifesto: “the proletariat has nothing to lose but its chains.”⁴⁷ A new era will follow the removal of oppression and injustice:

وَإِذْ ذَاكَ سَوْفَ يَعُودُ
أَبُوصَدِيقٍ وَدُودُ
وَحَتَّى أَبُوكَ، عَسَاهُ يَعُودُ
وَفِي كَفِّهِ بَاقَةٌ مِنْ وَرُودِ
تَضَمَّخَ أَنْفَاسُنَا بِالْعَطُورِ

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 world view 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

⁴⁷ Somekh concluded one of his poems in memory of the October Revolution with similar words (*al-Jadīd*, November 1959, p. 48-49).



expressed in the poem Semah dedicated to the Palestinian Communist poet Tawfīq Zayyād (1932-1994), addressed to “my brother, Tawfīq”:⁴⁸

لنا وطن لشعبينا سماه
إذا حصدوا جماجم في ثراه
وأرضه والتسائم والزهور
فإن حصادنا أمل ونور

We have a homeland — its skies
And earth and winds and flowers belong to both our peoples,
If they reap skulls in its dust,⁴⁹
Then our harvest is hope and light

Semah’s poem on the massacre at Kafr Qasim, no lesser in poetic and tragic affect than those written by the most prominent Palestinian poets,⁵⁰ 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. Another facet of their work is expressed in the strong longing for a utopia of social justice and peace among peoples, as we find in a poem Semah dedicated to Somekh and the latter’s response.⁵¹ The editorial board of *al-Jadīd* introduced the two poems with the following words:

حبّ الحياة في ظلّ السّلام أثار ويثير أرقّ العواطف وأعذب الأمانى. وقد أنطق هذا الحبّ شاعرين فتساجلا، ورأى أحدهما نشيد السّلام "في القلب الوديع" ورآه الثاني في "قلوب لظّها الألم المريع" ولكنهما اجتمعا في تخليد حبّهما للسّلام وللعاملين في سبيله.

The love for life in the shadow of peace has inspired, and continues to inspire, the most tender feelings and the sweetest hopes. This love has moved two poets to speak in the form of poetic debate. One of them saw the poem of peace “in a tranquil heart,” while the other saw it in “hearts seared by awful pain.” But they both join forces in immortalizing their love for peace and for those who labor toward it.

Semah’s poem, *Lahn al-Salām* (Song of Peace), while written in the classical *kāmil* meter, conceals within it modernist principles of form such as varying line length, changing and functional rhyme and enjambment. The poem not only presents a dualism on the realistic level of good and bad, but also a clear distinction, on the literary level, between the poetry of those bearing grudges and true poetry. According to Semah, Somekh writes the latter:

⁴⁸ 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, pp. 39-40 and verses of the poem were incorporated in SEMAH, 1959, p. 55-57.

⁴⁹ An allusion to Zayyād’s poem “The Harvest of Skulls,” which was written on the massacre at Kafr Qāsīm (*al-Jadīd*, January 1957, p. 25-30).

⁵⁰ Cf. for example, the poems of the Palestinian poet Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941-2008) on this event (Darwīsh, 1988, p. 207-220).

⁵¹ The two poems were published in *al-Jadīd*, March 1954, pp. 18-19. They were reprinted with some changes in SEMAH, 1959, p. 83-88.



أما نشيدك، فهو في القلب الوديع
يشدو به ثغر الربيع
هو في النفوس الصّابيات إلى الأمان
في الأعين المتطلّعات إلى الضياء
وإلى المحبّة والإخاء.

But your poem dwells in a tranquil heart,
Sung by the lips of spring.
It is in every soul which longs for tranquility
And in the eyes aching for light,
Love and brotherhood.

Unlike poetry that successfully camouflages itself whose antagonism quickly revealed, then withers and melt away, Somekh's poetry has chosen to dwell in the tranquil heart, and it belongs to all seekers of peace, love and brotherhood. The poet is convinced that this poem will overcome all Time's reversals:

سيذوب في أعماقه، وقع السّيّاط على الظهور
وقع السّيّاط على ظهور الكادحين
ورنين أقداح الطّغاة الظّالمين
لما تمادوا في الغرور
ستذوب فيه أنة القتلى الذين
دفعوا إلى الموت اللعين.

In its depths shall fade
The ring of lashes on the backs of nations
On the backs of the workers
And the trill of the arrows of oppressors
Whose pride was vaunted.
In it the sigh of the slaughtered shall yet fade,
Those who were driven to the accursed death.

The strength of this poetry is concealed in its eternal and hope-inspiring human values:

لحن رأيت به عروقي!
فإذا جرت فيه الدماء
وجرت دموع الأبرياء
منحته أسرار البقاء.
لحن تضجّ به القلوب المتعبة
والأنفس الملتهبة
عذب، تدفق في حليب المرضعات
الصّارخات من الألم
هو خالد في كلّ فم
نشوان لا يدري الخفوت
هو لا يموت.

This is a poem in which I saw veins!
And when its blood flows
And the tears of the innocent
It finds the secret of eternity.



This is a poem in which throb the hearts of the weary
And burning souls.
It is sweet, poured in the milk of nursing mothers
Shrieking in pain.
This poem is immortal, sung by every mouth,
It is drunk and knows not dumbness,
It transcends death.

Not only do blood and tears not destroy this poetry, which flows in mothers' milk, but they strengthen it until it realizes its principles.

Sasson Somekh responded with a poem called *Tilka al-Qulūb* (These Hearts) written in the same meter as Semah's poem. Like Semah's poem, it incorporates modernist elements of "free verse" such as varied line length, functional rhyme and enjambment. It uses as its motto Semah's lines "but your poem dwells in the tranquil heart / sung by the lips of spring." However, Somekh rejects the idea that his poem dwells in a tranquil heart:

لا! ليس في القلب الوديع!
لا ما هناك!
يشدو بأنغام السّلام
إعصار عنف واضطرام
إعصار حقّد وانتقام
إعصار حبّ لا ينام!
بل في قلوب لظّها الألم المريع
بل في عيون لاهبات.

No! [my poem] does not dwell in a tranquil heart!
Not there!
The poem of peace is sung
By a violent, burning storm
A resentful, vengeful storm
A storm of sleepless love.
My poem is sung by hearts seared by pain,
In burning eyes.

How is it possible to know tranquility, when everywhere one sees just hunger, oppression and misery?

تلك القلوب:
أوتستطيع إلى الوداعة من سبيل؟
وهي التي في كلّ يوم تجتني بؤسا جديد
أوتستطيع إلى الوداعة من سبيل
أم سقت بدموعها اللّيل الطّويل؟
تبكي المصير
والطفّل يبكي الجوع
والقطّ الصّغير
لحس الصّحون الفارغات.



These hearts,
Can they reach tranquility?
While every day they pluck new miseries
Can a mother reach tranquility
When she waters the long night with her tears?
Weeping over Fate
And the child wails in hunger,
And a small cat
Licks empty plates.

The poet describes the gloom of the present, but points also to the hope for salvation: in the shadow of the tent smolders a spark. The cold winds try to smother it, but the spark ignites into a giant flame:

لكنّما، قيس يلوح، كما يلوح
في ذلك الصباح
تبعي خنقه هوج الرّيح
عينا! فسوف يشبّ نارا
تحرق البؤس الثّقيل
وتزيح أكّاداس الظّلام
ولدي هو النّور الكبير!
ولدي سيبنّي الغد، لا للزّمة المتعتعين
لا للطّغاة
بل للبناء
للكادحين!

But a live coal pops up, it appears
In that lamp
The violent winds wish to extinguish it
In vain! It will yet burn like fire
Which will burn this awful wretchedness
And remove the darkness.
My child is the great light!
My child, yet to build the morrow, not for those who stammer,
Not for the oppressors,
But for the builders,
For the workers!

As is customary in Arabic Communist literature, the poet believes that the new generation will build the morrow, which stands in total contrast to the gloom of the present world:

لا! ليس في القلب الوديع!
بل في قلوب مثقلات بالمحبّة والإخاء
لا تستطيع سوى الشّقاء
في عالم ما زال للأشرار
في أرجائه عبث كبير
ما دامت الأبطال فيه مشرّدين وفي السّجون
ما دام يعلو للمشانق كلّ داع للسلام
ما دامت الحشرات والأمراض تدرى



كي تبديد الأمنين
ما دام زنج يشنقون
ما دام عرب من قراهم يطردون
ما دام في الدنيا عبيد
لم يروا غير الثراب
لا ليس في القلب الوديع!

No! [My poem] does not dwell in a tranquil heart!
But in hearts loaded with love and brotherhood
Their fate is only misery
In a world in which evil men still
Act recklessly and abusively
As long as its heroes are refugees and in prisons
And those who talk of peace go to the gallows
As long as the spread of insects and disease
Destroys those who are tranquil⁵²
As long as blacks go to the gallows
As long as Arabs are banished from their villages
As long as there are still slaves in the world
Who see nothing but dust!
No! [My poem] does not dwell in a tranquil heart!

The above lines convey a world view whose universality rejects the narrow confines of nationalism and preaches equality of rights for all peoples and justice and equality in all human societies. The two poems, on the surface contradictory, actually complement one another. Semah's poem was written out of a naive pacifism, while his friend tries to rouse him from his innocence. Semah confesses that his intellectual world was still unformed at that time, while Somekh, the active figure among the Communist Jewish writers of the 1950s, was ideologically mature.⁵³ The two poems paint reality in very gloomy colors indeed, in contrast to the utopian future of the redeemed world of Communist teaching, in which social justice will be realized for all. "We were like those who dream,"⁵⁴ Somekh says years later, but there is no doubt that their faith was strong in their ability to change reality, as expressed also by another anonymous Jewish poet:

قف يا أخي! لا تشكّ ظلما ثمّ تسكت كالبهائم
ناضل فلا يرجى التخلّص والتحرّر من مظالم
إن سارت الدنيا وأنت بعقر دارك بتّ نائم [...]]
إن القلوب إذا تألفت شوقها للعيش حرًا

⁵² This and the preceding line were omitted in the later version of the poem.

⁵³ Conversations with Ballas (14 June 1989) and Semah (2 May, and 6 and 14 June 1989). See, for example, Somekh's poem in memory of the October Revolution in *al-Jadid*, November 1955, p. 48-49.

⁵⁴ In his letter to me of 17 April 1989. Semah and Ballas confirmed this in my conversations with them mentioned above.



لا بدّ إلا أن تحقّق من ليالي الظّلم فجرًا

Stand, my brother! Rather than sleep on corruption and remaining silent like a beast.
Struggle! It is impossible to be free from injustice,
If the world goes on its way while you sleep at home [...]
If the hearts strive together for freedom,
They will undoubtedly bring the dawn beyond the nights of oppression.⁵⁵

Conclusion

The vacuum created in Arabic literature in Israel after the founding of Israel encouraged Arab-Jewish poets and writers, especially those emigrated from Iraq to engage actively in this field, particularly in the then dominant genre of poetry. Under the contemporary circumstances, their work was characterized by a preoccupation with socio-political issues and questions of related to the tensioned relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab-Palestinian minority. Very quickly two currents arose among the Jewish authors who were writing in Arabic, which thematically encompassed the basic currents in local Arabic literature. In both, the sharp, black-versus-white dichotomy was striking. For those who were sponsored by the 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, the dichotomy was social and universal, between a dark present filled with oppression and a utopian future ruled by justice that did not prevent nostalgic allusions to their past in Iraq from appearing in their work. The difference in the world-views may be seen in the concept of “spring” so frequently used by both camps in their poetry. According to the Establishment writers, their hopes had been realized in the Jewish, independent Israel of the 1950s, as we find in the first two words of Salīm Sha‘shū‘a’s first poem in the collection *The World of Light*, “The spring has arrived.”⁵⁶ In contrast, the struggle was still in full force for the Communist writers, and their eyes gazed toward the future “Till Spring Comes,” as seen from the title of Semah’s collection.

All the Jewish writers in Arabic in the 1950s preached coexistence, peace, and brotherhood out of a belief in their realization soon in the developing young state. But while this belief arose among the Establishment writers in the wake of the decisive victory of the Jews in the struggle for control of the land, it emerged among the Jewish leftist writers out 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

⁵⁵ *Al-Jadīd*, July 1958, p. 55.

⁵⁶ SHA‘SHŪ‘A, 1959, p. 9.



and in the present and future, as they also praised the contribution of Jewish writers in this field.⁵⁷ This contribution, and principally that of the Communists among them, was however very important because it stimulated the Arab literary climate in Israel thematically and poetically, and because it was a cry for a just co-existence which sprang from the throats of a few amidst the majority. It also signalled to the Arab-Palestinian minority, and in its own language, that not all the Jews were at peace with the injustice caused to the Arabs.

The 1960s marked the beginning of the end for the Arabic literature of the Arab Jews in Israel: 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 within the Communist party in Israel and the USSR's blind support for the Arab states. On the other hand, with the failure to create a "positive" and meaningful Arab culture, the Establishment gradually relinquished its support for those who taken shelter in its shade. A few succeeded in adapting to Hebrew writing, while others severed themselves from literary activity in Arabic. It was sad to see those few who were unable to accept this reality, like the talented writer Samīr Naqqāsh, who arrived in Israel at the age of thirteen and developed most of his talents there. With astounding devotion, he continues to write even when there is almost no one interested in his or his comrades' writing. "Their voices were lost," says Sasson Somekh⁵⁸ who had already understood in the 1950s that there was no hope for Jewish participation *as Jews* in Arabic literature. 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]."⁵⁹

Most of the Arab-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 they should write and communicate in, that is, whether to adapt to their new cultural surroundings and make the required and conscious shift in their aesthetic preference in the hope of finding a new audience, or whether to continue to write in Arabic, their beloved mother tongue. Hebrew literature by Arab-Jewish writers was known before this: for example, there was the work of Sulaymān Menaḥem Mānī (1850-1924), who even

⁵⁷ Quoted by AL-QĀSIM n.d., p. 24. Cf. the editorial in *al-Jadīd*, November 1954, p. 5. See also *al-Jadīd*, July-August 1969, p. 40-41.

⁵⁸ SOMEKH, 1989, p. 19.

⁵⁹ BARG, 1996, p. 3.



published a story on Sephardic life in Palestine.⁶⁰ Still, Hebrew writing by Arabized Jews adopting the new poetics of Hebrew literature emerged only in Israel. In the 1950s, for example, Nīr Shohet (1928-2011) was already publishing short stories in Hebrew; in 1957, Zakkay Binyāmīn Hārūn (b. 1927) published *El Hofo shel Ra'ayon* (To the Edge of an Idea), a collection of poems. 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 Amir Gilboa (1917-1984) and Abba Kovner (1918-1987). In 1964, Shimon Ballas (1930-2019) published *Ha-Ma'abara* (The Immigrant Transit Camp), the first Hebrew novel to be written by an Iraqi émigré.⁶¹

The demise of Arab-Jewish writing in Arabic may be illustrated by Almog Behar's (b. 1978) story "Anā min al-Yahūd" (I Am One of the Jews).⁶² 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 was to distance him from any dimension of Arab-Jewish identity and culture. But, in a conscious twist of fate he decided to create for himself an Arab-Jewish identity or, better still, to reclaim the 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 Jews to decide to consciously adopt Arab-Jewish identity and invest his energies into acquiring the culture that Israeli-Jewish society decided to abandon. Behar's efforts are by no means a part of the fictional Arab-Jewish identity that was invented somewhere in the late 1980s and the early 1990s mostly for the aim of identity politics.⁶³ "Anā min al-Yahūd" is an exceptional autobiographical meta-fictional Hebrew story with an Arabic title that might be a good illustration for 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, indicating the common Semitic origins and the similarity of both languages. But, the title at the same time shocks the readers who are not used to such 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-

⁶⁰ *Ha-Tsvi* I (1885), pp. 31-34. Most Hebrew literature written in Iraq focused on religious issues as did liturgical poetry. On the emergence of modern Hebrew literature in Iraq from 1735 to 1950, see HAKAK, 2003.

⁶¹ BALLAS, 1964.

⁶² The story was first published in *Ha'aretz*, Literary Supplement, 22 April 2005. For an English translation, see SNIR, 2019, pp. 309-316. Arabic translation, by Muḥammad 'Abbūd, was published on his blog at <http://aboud78.blogspot.com/> (accessed on 24 September 2020). For a short film based on the story, see <https://www.facebook.com/anaminelyahud/> (accessed on 5 August 2019). For a theatrical production based on the story, see <http://www.arab-hebrew-theatre.org.il/show.php?id=6594> (accessed on 1 August 2020).

⁶³ See SNIR, 2015, p. 225-226.



Arab-Jewish grandfather Anwar. The “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 check him slowly, 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 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 intertextual allusion is to *Blindness* (1995) by the Portuguese writer José Saramago (1922-2010), in which suddenly a man 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.⁶⁴

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 a start of a revolution, but only "the last visit of health before death."

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). Unlike these novels, which feature members of the younger generation as the driving force behind the adaptation to a new society and 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 intertextual 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 in the novella "Prophecies of a Madman in a Cursed City."⁶⁵ Behar provides no real resolution, instead echoing in his final sentence the same ambiguity of identity that carries through the story. Shortly before the story was published, Almog Behar published his poem "My Arabic Is Mute," which seems to be the nucleus of his story and at the same time encapsulated the demise of Arab-Jewish culture and identity:

הערבית שלי אלקמת
תנוקה מן הגרון
מקללת את עצמה
בלי להוציא מלה
ישנה באויר הממחניק
של מקלטי נפשי
מסתתרת

⁶⁴ SARAMAGO, 2013, p. 309.

⁶⁵ See SNIR, 2019, pp. 110-122, 173-174, 179-180, 196-202, 295-308.



מבגני-המשפחה
מאחורי תריסי העברית.
והעברית שלי גועשת
מתרוצצת בין הקדרים
ומרפסות השכנים
משמיעה קולה ברבים
מנבאת בואם של אלהים
ונחפורים
ואז מתכנסת בפלון
חושבת את עצמה
גלויות על שפת עורה
כסויות בין דפי בשרה
רגע עירמה ורגע לבושה
היא מצטמצמת בכרסא
מבקשת את סליחת לבה.
העברית שלי פוחדת
מתחזה בלשקט לעברית
ולוחשת לתברים
עם כל דפיקה בשעריה:
"אהלן! אהלן!"
ומול כל שוטר עובר ברחוב
שולפת תעודת זהות
מצביעה על הסעיף המגונן:
"אנא מן אל-יהוד, אנא מן אל-יהוד".
והעברית שלי חרשת
לפעמים חרשת מאד.

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 the 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.⁶⁶

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⁶⁶ The poem was published in 2005 in *Helicon: Anthological Journal of Contemporary Poetry* vol. 68, p. 30. Together with the original poem, an Arabic translation, by Rīmā Abū Jābir (b. 1981), was appended (p. 31). For the poem translated into six languages, see <https://almogbehar.wordpress.com/> (accessed on 6 July 2018). On the poem and the story, as well as on the differences between the stages in which people identified themselves as Arab-Jews, from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, see also BEHAR, 2017, pp. 131-152. The article concludes with the following: "Today, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, the only place left for the Arab-Jew to live or relive a full life, is the literary imagination. We have finally become fiction" (p. 150).



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