Mustafa Badawi, 1925–2012

Studying Modern Arabic Literature

Mustafa Badawi, Scholar and Critic

Edited by Roger Allen and Robin Ostle

EDINBURGH
University Press

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12 (2f) Jackson's Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ
www.euppublishing.com

Typeset in 11/15 Adobe Garamond by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire,
and printed and bound in the United States
of America

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 9662 8 (hardback)
ISBN 978 0 7486 9663 5 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 0349 8 (epub)

The Editors are grateful to the Middle East Centre, St Antony's College, Oxford for meeting the costs of the Index.

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21. Ibid., p. 234.
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24. [Bayram al-Tunisi], "Ala al-rababa . . .', *Al-Shabab* 69 (21 May 1922). This text does not appear in *Muntakhabat al-Shabab*. All translations are mine and drawn from this text. I transliterate according to the printed text not colloquial pronunciation.
25. Kruk, 'Sirat 'Antar ibn Shaddad', p. 296; Heath, *Thirsty Sword*, pp. 30–1.
26. *Qissat Khadra al-sharifa* . . ., Cairo: Maktabat al-jumhuriyya al-'arabiyya, n.d.
27. Kruk, 'Sirat 'Antar ibn Shaddad', p. 297.
28. Heath, *Thirsty Sword*, pp. 32–8; quotation, p. 38.
29. H. T. Norris, 'The Rediscovery of the Ancient Sagas of the Banu Hilal', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51:3 (1988), pp. 462–81.
30. Heath, *Thirsty Sword*, pp. 16–17.
31. Canova, '*Sira* Literature', p. 726. Heath sees this functional interrelationship differently for *Sirat 'Antar*: prose used descriptively for 'object of the moment', poetry fulfilling a generalising, expansive function (*Thirsty Sword*, pp. 109–15).
32. Heath, *Thirsty Sword*, p. 151.
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Jewish Arabs in the Israeli Asylum: A Literary Reflection[1]

Miriam Cooke

In the 1950s two of Mustafa Badawi's Jewish students left Iraq for Israel. Life in Baghdad had become untenable for Sasson Somekh and David Semah, and they made the perilous trip to the young Zionist state. There they learned Hebrew and became integrated into the predominantly Ashkenazi culture. However, unlike many of their Mizrahi Jewish contemporaries, they held on to their mother tongue and nurtured their interest in Arabic literature and culture. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, both pursued their doctorates on Egyptian men of letters under the supervision of Mustafa Badawi. Sasson Somekh analysed the early novels of Najib Mahfuz, and David Semah focused on the Egyptian critics 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Taha Husayn and Muhammad Mandur. In 1973, Brill published Somekh's dissertation with the title *The Changing Rhythm* and a year later they brought out Semah's *Four Egyptian Literary Critics*. Both went on to pursue distinguished careers in the Israeli academy. This chapter examines the lives and writings of a few Mizrahi intellectuals who, like Badawi's students, succeeded despite the challenges they faced as Jewish Arabs.

In 2002, an Iraqi Muslim named Samir (b. 1955)[2] directed *Forget Baghdad*, a documentary about Iraqi writers in Israel. Having heard so much about the Jews and the role they had played in his country, he wanted to know what happened to them after they left in the 1950s. How had they been welcomed and how were they living in the Jewish state?

'They bought us,' responds Samir Naqqash (1938–2006). 'We became their slaves . . . They sent us back 100,000 years.' Author of five collections of stories, three plays and four novels, Naqqash was one of the last Iraqis in Israel to write in Arabic.

Reliving his traumatic encounter with Hebrew, Shimon Ballas (b. 1930), Professor of Arabic literature at Haifa University, recalls: 'I tried to forget Arabic, not to read a single letter.' Then one night in the 1960s Arabic exacted her revenge by bombarding him with words and phrases that kept him sleepless until morning. Since then he has written in Hebrew, but 'carried' Arabic with him wherever he goes. Author of ten works of fiction – including *The Transit Camp* (1964)[3] – he has also produced several Hebrew translations and studies of modern Arabic literature.

The prize-winning author Sami Michael (b. 1926) comments wryly on life in Israel decades after immigration, 'We were completely integrated into life in Baghdad, but in Israel I felt like a visitor, a stranger'.

'In the Arab world we're Jews,' says the critic Ella Shohat (b. 1955) who was born to Iraqi parents in Israel and immigrated to the United States in the early 1980s, 'and in Israel we're Arabs. We always have the wrong identity.'

Samir's interviews reveal these intellectuals' continuing alienation in and from Israel and their determination to remember Baghdad. Since the 1990s, several Jewish Arabs have found national recognition, and they have begun to highlight their stigmatised difference.

In a landmark anthology of non-European Jewish writings in Israel, entitled *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing* (1996), the critic Ammiel Alcalay traces the development of a Mizrahi consciousness:

> Originally a component of the pejorative label used to institutionally categorize non-European Jews (*benei 'edot ha-mizrah* / 'offspring of oriental ethnic communities'), the word *mizrah* (East) and *mizrahi* (Easterner) gradually took on qualities of pride and defiance as the *mizrahim* (plural) came to describe themselves.

Celebrating this literary recognition, Alcalay asserts that some of the most important and vital literary oeuvres in Israel

> have emerged precisely out of the *mizrahi* problematic, with all its attendant concerns about identity, memory, language, and minority/majority relations . . . By remaining connected to the sources of their own particular pain and experience, these writers refuse to accept the universality of what has, ideologically, come to be construed as Jewish 'fate,' applicable to all Jews, in all places, at all times, sooner or later. Most paradoxically, this refusal is expressed through insisting on the fact of exile, both personal and collective, within the promised land, within the space of return itself.[4]

Mizrahi writers have found literary inspiration in their experience of alienation as oriental Jews. Unlike European Jews, they do not consider the Holocaust to be their nation's greatest tragedy and shaping experience. For them to be eternal exiles within the utopian space of return is the source of their suffering.

Looking at the first wave of immigration and its aftermath through novels, poetry, autobiographies and films, I argue that Israel is an asylum. In the first instance, it was an asylum for European Jews (Ashkenazis) until they turned the asylum into their state. From that point on, they created asylums for various constituencies, including Jewish Arabs.

Foreigners in the Asylum of the Promised Land

Established only sixty-five years ago, Israel's mission was to construct a nation state that would gather in all Jews who had been millennially scattered. Although all Jews by virtue of their religion should have had the 'right of return' to Zion, not all Jews enjoyed this right equally, especially when they came from Arab countries. These Jewish Arabs presented a conundrum because, although they were co-religionists, they shared the ethnicity of the enemy. Where Arabs and Jews are considered mutually exclusive identities, Jewish Arabs don't quite fit. Their story contests the myth that Israel is a melting pot for all Jews. Rather, Israel was and continues to be what sociologist Bryan Turner calls an enclave society.[5]

There are many enclaves in multicultural, multiethnic Israel for those who do not quite fit the ideal notion of what an Israeli should be. The enclave of interest in this chapter is the one that houses Jewish Arabs, especially those who came from Iraq. Unlike the mostly illiterate North Africans[6] who chose to go to Israel, Iraqi immigrants were generally from the urban middle class. The transition from an Arab Muslim society, where they lived

comfortably as a minority, to the Jewish nation state was unexpectedly painful.

The twenty-four women and men in Alcalay's anthology, who include Arabs, Iranians, Indians and Turks, articulate that pain. Although many wrote during the 1960s, they were so marginalised that it was as though they had not written. While Naqqash remained above the fray by refusing to use Hebrew and writing for Arabs outside Israel, others were hurt by this critical neglect. For Tikva Levi, erasure of Mizrahi culture was tantamount to a 'covert Holocaust . . . This is sometimes much more difficult to deal with than a wall with a closed border . . . we're inside Racism parallel to Holocaust / awfully close to the graveyard.'[7] The analogy is shocking, but it compels attention to what she considers to be a form of cultural genocide. How is it possible that this national home for all Jews should quickly prove to be cruel to some Jews?

For Jewish Arabs life in Israel was a long-term experience of asylum. The asylum is a refuge, but it is also a place of isolation, discipline and exile; it mirrors society by locating the norm in the negative: this, thank God, I am not. A 'total institution', to use Erving Goffman's term, the asylum is a closed world where the expectations and values of society are learned and internalised. The asylum molds individuals into compliant social actors. It is in such places, writes the Algerian Jew Jacques Derrida, that the new arrival becomes a foreigner, a

> guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest . . . From the point of view of the law, the guest, even when he is well received, is first of all a foreigner, he must remain a foreigner (who) is not the other, the completely other who is relegated to an absolute outside, savage, barbaric, precultural and prejuridical, outside and prior to the family, the community, the city, the nation, or the State.[8]

The one who comes from elsewhere is first of all a foreigner, or an illegitimate guest. The foreigner's acceptance into the new community is contingent upon conformity with the host's expectations. One might say that the foreigner dwells for a time in a *barzakh*. This Qur'anic term refers to the metaphysical space between this life and the hereafter that is both and neither.[9] For the Jewish Arabs in Israel, the physical *barzakh* was the transit camp that

bridged the Arab past and the Israeli present; both were at once present and absent.

Acculturation in the Asylum

Foreigners must learn the rules of the desired home and prove to their hosts that they are assets to be embraced and not parasites to be shunned. In Asia's pre-Israeli transit camps where they awaited transfer to the Promised Land, Mizrahi Jews learned the protocols of Zionist citizenship. In 1943, an emissary to Asian Jews in a camp in Abadan wrote patronisingly about his charges: 'With the help of science it is possible to succeed in removing people from dark corners to brighter corners . . . The main thing is to extricate these people from the Levantine morass in which they are mired.'[10] This is the language of European colonialism: the European Jews must extricate non-European Jews from this primal, polluting Levantine morass.

After transfer to Israel, these 'foreigners' were held in transit camps until permanent housing could be identified. While Europeans were also penned in camps, their experience was generally shorter and less bitter. In his 2007 autobiography *Baghdad Yesterday*, the literary critic Sasson Somekh (b. 1933) recalls Operation Ezra and Nehemiah.[11] Over 100,000 Jews left Iraq in 1951 unready 'for the drastic transition from an Arab country to the new Jewish state'.[12] They were taken to a camp near Haifa run by Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazis, the term used for European Jews. Although Somekh refuses to write of the 'difficulties of absorption and the challenges posed by our having to start a new life in a new language', he does note that 'life in Israel could be cruel as well, and many of my generation, who were scalded in the melting pot of the fifties and sixties, were distanced from their native culture because of the continuous conflict with the Arab world' (p. 10, p. 174). Awarded some of Israel's most coveted prizes, Somekh prefers not to critique the state that has honoured him. Yet he does hint at the ordeal of the first years when he and other Jewish Arabs were scalded in Israel's 'melting pot'.

Jewish Arab intellectuals' descriptions of the transit camps and their persistence in the mind recall the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's states of exception where

> what is being excluded in the camp is *captured outside*, that is, it is included by virtue of its very exclusion . . . the birth of the camp . . . takes place when the political system of the modern nation-state . . . decides to undertake the management of the biological life of the nation directly as its own task . . . The state of exception, which used to be essentially a temporary suspension of the order, becomes now a new and stable spatial arrangement inhabited by that naked life that increasingly cannot be inscribed into the order.[13]

Jewish Arabs wrote about their 'naked life' in an Israel, one that excluded Arabs, both Palestinian Israelis and Jews migrating from Arab countries. Sharing the race of the Arab enemy, Jewish Arabs had to remake themselves into Ashkenazis to be accepted, to be fully clothed.

The process of acculturation in the asylum of the camps has figured importantly in Mizrahi literature. Writing about literary representations of the immigration of Iraqi Jews to Israel, the historian Moshe Gat cites several fictional accounts of the horrors of the camps where Arab culture was to be stripped away and replaced by the veneer of Europe.[14] The Iraqi Israeli journalist Nissim Rejwan (b. 1924) is scathing: 'Having shattered his personality, the Ashkenazis proceed to ask that he be an Ashkenazi like unto themselves . . . integration of the new immigrant into Israeli society and culture [meant] "remoulding" the newcomer from Asian and African countries into something very much like the self-image of the veteran, non-Oriental, Jewish settler'.[15] Shattering the personality, demanding mimicry and remoulding in the image of the Ashkenazi were the crucial elements of the Mizrahi acculturation. They were stripped of what Goffman calls 'identity equipment'.[16] Without past or culture or dignity, they could no longer present their usual image of themselves to others. Simultaneously included and excluded from the society into which they sought admission, they were forced to change and to reject the identity equipment they had brought from afar, to become worthy of inclusion in the modern family of the nation state.

Transit Camp

When a character in Ballas's *The Transit Camp* asks what transit camps mean, he is told they were a 'passage' to complete integration into the life of the state. I looked for the word in the Bible and found it in the Book of Samuel: a

passage about Jonathan 'going between the passes, and they had "a sharp rock on the one side, and a sharp rock on the other side." There's a "transit" camp for you! A rock on one side and a rock on the other side. Go ahead and try to break those rocks! Isn't this just another way of saying exile?'[17] The narrator is not the illiterate ignoramus the authorities think he is, for he immediately goes to the Bible to find the real meaning of *ma'bara*, or passage. He finds Scylla and Charybdis on either side of the passage and beyond. This 'passage' signals the return of the millennial condition of exile. Now, however, exile is in the *barzakh* between the forbidden Arab past and the unattainable Israeli present; Jewish Arabs are simultaneously in both and neither. They are condemned to exist in the limbo of the asylum.[18]

Somekh and his compatriots were outraged when they realised that they had been reduced to inconvenient commodities:

> The clerks called this process *siddur* which means literally, 'arrangement' . . . Because of the linguistic similarity between Hebrew and Arabic, the word *siddur* and its related forms sounded very much like the Arabic *tasdir* which means 'the exporting of goods.' We angrily protested the fact that overnight we had been transformed from people into goods, imported and exported by Yiddish-speaking clerks.[19]

Somekh's knowledge of Arabic reveals the truth lurking in the Hebrew: Jewish Arabs were reduced to the naked life of commodities at best, of parasites at worst. It would take a long time for them to cease to be foreigners.

For the Moroccan Albert Swissa, the first days in Israel felt like living in 'a penitentiary, or area of containment'. His parents soon realised that 'they and their kind were pariahs, ostracized from the economic, social, cultural and – worst of all – spiritual life of the nascent state of Israel . . . it fell to the Oriental Jews to fight on all fronts of Israeli society, to fight against the society itself, and to fight against the image Israeli society ascribed to them'.[20] They were Derrida's foreigners who might never earn the right to membership in the new nation.[21]

Religion and the Secular State

How could these 'foreigners' achieve nationalisation? The process was contradictory: through religion and not-religion. Israel embodies a paradox:

it is both a modern, thus secular, nation state and a premodern, religious belonging. How could it be both modern and premodern, both secular and religious? The answer is that it was modern for some (Ashkenazis) and provisionally premodern for others (Mizrahim). Let me explain.

During the first half of the twentieth century, European Zionists – with the help of British colonial powers – paved the way for the establishment of a nation state that would provide a national identity, national rights and citizenship to all Jews regardless of their place of origin. Palestine was chosen to be this new national home for the Jews. From the end of the nineteenth century, Zionists transformed secular Palestinian territory into a religious European place. Once stripped of its secular, national markings, Palestine was overwritten with a religious national identity that, ironically, was newly secularised.

The sociologist Yehouda Shenhav chronicles the earliest instances of the paradoxical process. European emissaries to Asian transit camps, he explains, attempted 'to nationalize the Arab Jews through religion'.[22] The very first step involved erasing the dangerous Arab ethnicity and replacing it with a religious identity. Once Jewish Arabs had become just Jews they could begin the journey toward alignment with the European Jews. In other words, religion would erase, or at the very least overwrite, the offending ethnicity. The catch, however, was that modern European Jews in Palestine and then in Israel were deemed to be secular because modernity is by definition secular. It was not enough, therefore, to emphasise their religious identity to become modern Israelis, Jewish Arabs had to secularise their newly acquired religio-national identity.

How did this confusing situation come about? The paradoxical outcome of the Enlightenment secularisation of human rights in the late eighteenth century, Israel is a modern nation state with a premodern religious core identity. Enlightenment human rights guaranteed freedom and equality for citizens of internationally recognised nation states, and not for members of religious communities. Premised on ethnic homogeneity, modern nation states excluded those who did not fit the new national profile, thus creating internal and interregional minorities living 'outside normal legal protection', and without guaranteed rights.[23] That was what happened to Jews in twentieth-century Europe. They became minorities in need of a state

that would give secular national rights to Jews, namely people sharing a religion.

The birth of the Israeli state transformed European Jews from stateless refugees into citizens of an internationally recognised nation state. Their unmarked identity was to become the norm for all who aspired to be Israeli citizens, and assimilation became the sine qua non. Although all asylum seekers had the moral claim to first admittance into the new Jewish state, in that they had what was called 'the right of return', the state had the reciprocal right to impose conditions. Acquiescence to these conditions then determined whether to grant citizenship or asylum. If, for example, a Jewish Arab seemed more Arab than Jew, citizenship might be postponed until such time that the Jew predominated. But then this new Jew without ethnicity had to transform the religious identification into a cultural identity. Israel was a state for Jews who did not identify as religious but rather as cultural citizens. In this politically ambivalent system, Palestinian non-Jews and Jewish Arabs became minorities outside normal legal protection.

Newly nationalised through premodern religion, Jewish Arabs were confronted with a conundrum: how to retain and balance religious, ethnic and cultural affiliations and identities? Held in asylums on the margins of society, Jewish Arabs had to learn how to become both modern and culturally Jewish. But how could Jewish Arabs secularise their newly emphasised religious identification without falling back into the dangerous Arab ethnicity? If they were to be successful, they might jeopardise the very process that qualified them to be Israeli. How were they to deal with the racialised imbalance between Ashkenazis and Jewish Arabs that was articulated in terms of modernity?

For Ella Shohat, it is racial prejudice that divides Israeli society into asylums containing Jewish Arabs and Palestinians, and the racialisation of Jewish Arabs goes back to nineteenth-century European colonial practices. In *Taboo Memories*, she writes about the violence done to Egyptian Jews by the European appropriation of the Geniza documents. In 1864 Solomon Schechter of Cambridge University travelled to Cairo where he 'discovered' some documents in the Ben Ezra synagogue. For 850 years, Egyptian rabbis had stored documents carrying 'scriptural traces of God's name'. Assuming the local community did not value this treasure, despite the fact that they had safeguarded it for centuries, British Jews transferred it to the safekeeping of

the Taylor–Schechter collection in Cambridge. Thus 'inadvertently began a process of symbolic displacement of Jews from the East from their geo-cultural space . . . While the Geniza documents testify to the rootedness of the Jews in a vast region stretching from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, the textual "witnesses" themselves ironically were uprooted and displaced.'[24] What we learn from this account is that when the Geniza documents became part of an unmarked, universal Jewish patrimony their Mediterranean/ Arab origins were erased.[25] In turn and with time, this 'universal' cultural legacy was racialised to become Ashkenazi. This, Shohat explains, is what happened to Jewish Arabs who 'suddenly became simply "Jews"' (205) when they arrived in Israel. It was not enough to be Jewish to become Israeli; as good colonial subjects, they had to mimic their European co-religionists.

In her controversial study of the filmic representation of Mizrahis, Shohat tore the veil off anti-Arab racism. Between 1967 and 1977, a new genre of farce called 'bourekas' emerged. Folkloric outsiders, Jewish Arabs were stereotyped as lazy and primitive but also cunning: 'Since the target audience is the Oriental public, the films are necessarily permeated by social and ethnic tensions. In the world of the oppressed, the oppressor is a constant (historical) presence in relation to whom the repressed must either assimilate or rebel.'[26] One of the best-known boureka films is Ephraim Kishon's 1964 *Sallah Shabbati*. It opens with refugees disembarking from a plane: the first to leave are the wealthy Ashkenazis, elegant, urbane and encumbered with numerous suitcases; next, out tumble some dirty, raggedy Mizrahis, and a little girl appears on the conveyor belt having stowed away with the luggage. The eponymous hero is taken with wife and seven children to a filthy transit camp, out of which they are promised immediate transfer to permanent housing. The only immediate, however, is the realisation that this promise is bogus. Vignette after hilarious vignette follows Shabbati's wily struggles to obtain the permanent housing that all Jews were promised upon arrival in Israel. After failing to sell his beautiful daughter to a fat chauffeur or to the neighboring kibbutz, he lights on a plan. In this new world you get what you do not want, so he organises a demonstration against permanent housing. He gets the coveted transfer. The film ends with the motley crowd disappearing into the concrete jungle of a soulless housing development. Questions linger: Will permanent housing be different from the asylum of the camp? Can

Shabbati ever become fully Israeli? Or will he continue to carry the camp with him wherever he goes?

The Moroccan Sami Shalom Chetrit provides an answer in his elliptical 'Getting to Know a Friendly American Jew: Conversation'. An American interrogates a Jewish Arab:

> – And you are, I mean, you're Israeli, right?
> – Yes, of course.
> – Your family is observant?
> – Pretty much . . .
> – Excuse me for prying, but I just have to ask you, are you Jewish or Arab?
> – I'm an Arab Jew . . .
> – Arab Jew? I've never heard of that . . . Look, I've got nothing against Arabs. I even have friends who are Arabs, but how can you say 'Arab Jew' when all the Arabs want is to destroy the Jews?
> – And how can you say 'European Jews' when the Europeans have already destroyed the Jews?[27]

Neither Shabbati nor Chetrit's Jewish Arab will escape the asylum. Like Tikva Levi, who compared the situation of Jewish Arabs in Israel with the Holocaust, writing 'we're inside Racism parallel to Holocaust', Chetrit juxtaposes the Holocaust – here unnamed but clearly indicated – and Ashkenazi anti-Arab racism. But the poem is making another vital point: the Holocaust is past; more, it must be forgotten in the newly muscular Israel. The weak diasporic past of European Jews has been transcended, and the present reality is a nation state surrounded by Arab enemies.

The Iraqi Jews' Exodus

Why did over 200,000 Jews in Arab countries leave their homes and prosperous businesses in the early 1950s and start from scratch in a brand new state? While some challenge the Zionist narrative of Arab pogroms, others lament betrayal by Muslim friends and neighbours.

Nissim Rejwan is among those who deny the story of local persecutions: 'it was the fashion to speak of mass *aliya* from Muslim lands as "'rescue immigration", implying that these ancient Jewish communities were virtually ejected from the lands of their birth'.[28] Half a century after leaving Iraq,

Rejwan exonerates the Iraqi state, claiming that there were other reasons for Jews to leave, notably encouragement from European Zionists and provocation by German Nazis. In other words, Zionists were trying to attract Jewish Arabs to swell the Israeli ranks, or German Nazis had incited anti-Semitism in Iraq.

Like Rejwan, Naqqash and Ballas hesitate to criticise their Iraqi neighbours. In his 2004 novel *Shlomo the Kurd*, Naqqash implicates the Germans in the *farhud* – the Arabic term for pogrom. In June 1941, the British put down a nationalist coup against Nuri Said, their puppet Prime Minister. Nationalists were pro-Nazi and so they turned their anger against the Jews who were wrongly suspected of being pro-British and therefore pro-Zionist. One hundred and fifty Jews were massacred. Shlomo, head of the Kurdish Jewish community, jumps back and forth across the twentieth century to tell a surreal story about the new wandering Jew. We read the *farhud* through a First World War predecessor in Azeri Sablakh. In 1917, Shlomo fled famine[29] and also Russian, Ottoman and Persian forces fighting for control of his native town. Naqqash indicts the outside forces and praises the Jews' unwavering loyalty to their Muslim and Christian neighbours: 'Azrail [the angel of death] came to stay in Sablakh when the foreigners arrived' (p. 324). Czarist Russians occupied the city and killed Muslims, assuming them to be allied with their Ottoman enemies. Mourning the fate of the Muslims, Shlomo exclaimed that they 'are still our brothers and family as they have been from the beginning of time. Neither war nor ordeal can change us . . . God blesses all who give shelter to their neighbour' (pp. 180–4, pp. 208–9, p. 257). He gave shelter to the displaced people of the town until almost all had gone. The Ottomans' promise 'not to leave a single Jew or Christian alive' (p. 348) prefigures the *farhud* and also rumours of Hitler's call for 'No more Jews on the face of the earth!' In this version, Iraqi Jews were caught between the British, European Zionists and Hitler. Not knowing whom to trust, Shlomo asked, 'Is this a return of Sablakh in Baghdad? The English leave and invite the Nazis.'[30] The perpetrators are not identified beyond accusations of British and Nazi complicity. The townsfolk in First World War Sablakh like their successors in 1941 Baghdad remain loyal to each other despite their different religions and terrible fates.

In *The Other One* (1990), Ballas joins Rejwan and Naqqash in exculpating Muslim friends and neighbours. He blames the Zionists for using unscrupulous methods to bring Jewish Arabs to Israel:

> Israeli agents got what they wanted when they planted bombs in the synagogues, for they managed to sow panic among Jews who hadn't exactly rushed to sign on for immigration at first. They worked hand in hand with the authorities to realize the Zionist program, and Jewish money worked on the decision makers who had made a covenant with the enemy.[31]

The European Zionists are violent and unscrupulous in this account of Iraqi Jews' decisions to leave. More, they are in cahoots with the Nazis.

While recalling his grief at leaving his Baghdad home, Sasson Somekh is less absolute than Naqqash and Ballas in defending Muslim friends and neighbours and their role in the *farhud* and also afterwards: 'for weeks and months the community remained in mourning and shock. How could yesterday's neighbours have become wild animals in an instant? Was the *Farhood* a one-time event, or might it signal the opening of a new, problematic era in Muslim–Jewish relations?' .[32] Somekh answers his own question by describing what happened after 1948 and the founding of the Israeli state: the Iraqi government cracked down on Jewish-run businesses and Jewish civil servants said to be working on sensitive documents. Universities stopped admitting Jews; people started to curse and spit on 'dirty Jews' who feared leaving their homes.[33] The 1950 Citizenship Waiver Law deprived any who left for Israel of Iraqi citizenship and allowed seizure of any assets they might possess. In 1950 and 1951, Jewish sites were bombed.[34] For Somekh, the Iraqi government was active in the purge of Jews.

Language and the Asylum

Israel was founded on the right of all Jews to return to Zion. But before they could fully return to the land from which they had been millennially excluded, they had to pass through the asylum of the transit camp. A condition of release was mastery of Modern Hebrew. Language was crucial in their self-fashioning. Some Iraqi writers assert that, whereas Ashkenazi Jews passed quickly into Israeli society, Jewish Arabs did not. Rejwan notes that there were even conditions for learning the language. Jewish Arabs, he writes,

> had to be 'intelligent,' exceptional, and 'clean,' or whatever, to be taught the elements of the Hebrew language! . . . Newcomers from 'certain European' countries simply cease to be 'new immigrants' as soon as they have acquired a smattering of Hebrew – so that in a sense the appellation 'new' applies exclusively to immigrants from Oriental lands, though they may have been as long as fifteen years in the country . . . the integration of Oriental Jews into Israeli society can be attained 'only through Ashkenazisation' . . . [the Iraqi Jew] was not a simple Jew among other Jews, but some nameless 'Oriental' among 'Westerners,' a man who was to be 'raised' to the standards of his new society, to be 'cleansed and purified . . . from the dross of Orientalism'.[35]

Rejwan denounces the contempt with which he and fellow Iraqi Jews were treated. Highly educated and full of hopes, they had been relegated to the pre-cultural of Derrida's foreigners. Only the intelligent, exceptional and clean could be taught Hebrew, the civilising tool essential in the transformation of Arabs into Europeans.

One character in Ballas's *Transit Camp* confirms this linguistic condition. Mastery of Modern Hebrew did not apply to Europeans. Not only were they quickly released from the camps with little or no Hebrew, but some Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazis from Central and Eastern Europe also held positions of authority. In exasperation he exclaims: 'the God of [the State of] Israel is also Yiddish!' (p. 89). In an interview with the anthropologist Smadar Lavie, Ballas mused about the difficulty of transitioning from Arabic to Hebrew. The two languages could not co-exist; one had to replace the other and so he had 'felt forced to un-learn my Arabic and re-fracture my identity'.[36] Language in this context is not merely a skill, it is an essential part of identity that must be broken to change.

Linguistic deviations warned of a reversion to a pre-Israel Arabness. Since this Arab identity no longer attached to a nation state, reversion was to a state of statelessness. Statelessness meant the return of a desire for the birth nation, and for another identity, i.e. Arab, i.e. enemy. The challenge was how to perform loyalty, or mimicry, without losing all sense of self-respect, how to learn citizenship while still in the asylum.

Asylum of the Mind

In poems, fiction and memoirs, Arab Jews record their ongoing sense of living in an asylum; they are outside Israeli society but also captured in it. In 'December '86 by the Rivers of Babylon', Tikva Levi laments the fate of the eternal strangers

> On a park bench
> They sit and also cry
> In their transmigratory company
> My elders
> Thirty-six years in the Land
> Still foreigners . . .
> From Babylon to Israel
> And from Palestine in the refugee camps
> This is no ambrosia
> But a bitter cup
> Drunk daily
> Years upon years
> Of hope compounded
> To return to their borders
> To their country to their homeland.[37]

In a few short lines, the reader lives the couple's thirty-six years of bitterness. The finality of their situation is sealed in their constant sense of exile in the place of return and in the hopeless longing to return to Babylon, their birthplace.

The Jewish Arab asylum in Israel, like Agamben's camp, is neither temporary nor restricted to a particular place. Once established, the camp becomes systemic and a state of mind. Permanent consciousness of the asylum is illustrated in Rejwan's depiction of the transit camp or *ma'bara.* The physical camp persists in 'the "other" *ma'bara* of prejudice, of indignity and of enforced inferiority. This *ma'bara* is far from liquidated as yet' (Rejwan 2006, pp. 89–90).[38] It is the '*ma'bara* of the mind' or a 'mental transit camp'. The logic of the transit camps pursued Jewish Arabs even after they left its physical confines.

Only their children might escape. The birth of his daughter made Sami Michael realise that while he would remain 'a *stranger*, for her, this is her home, her country. So I settled here because of her'.[39] His use of the word 'stranger' when talking with Samir recalls Derrida's foreigners or asylum seekers and Foucault's strangers who are 'judged not only by appearances but by all that they may betray and reveal in spite of themselves'.[40] Nothing of the Arab stranger/foreigner should betray and reveal itself. But the stranger/foreigner is so hard to erase.

Political Awakening

Over the past twenty years, some Jewish Arab intellectuals have embraced their stigmatised difference and written confidently from the place of their alienation, from the metaphorical asylum.[41] Several have achieved recognition, including three Israel Prize laureates, the literary critic Sasson Somekh, the sociologist Sami Smooha and the novelist Sami Michael. Recognition and perhaps also a sense of immunity from the racism directed against their compatriots have empowered them to demand attention to their writings and to the ongoing marginalisation of many Jewish Arabs.

Writing about non-European Jews who are fighting against the status quo, Sami Chetrit hails

> an emerging Mizrahi alternative to Ashkenazi Zionism in all aspects – religious, social, economic, and cultural. At the same time, Mizrahi electoral power is a contested field for which most Israeli political parties vie . . . The 'New Mizrahim' is a term for an unorganised but growing wave of young people . . . who have created a new discourse with their critique of Israel's Ashkenazi-dominated social, economic, cultural and political structures . . . [they] want none of the Ashkenazi Zionist collective memory and seek to form a Mizrahi collective memory from which a Mizrahi consciousness and alternative vision for the State of Israel will emerge . . . Unlike their predecessors, they are not asking for 'acceptance' or 'integration' but are questioning the fundamental premises of the state.[42]

The majority in Israel, Mizrahi and especially the youth with their electoral power, are challenging the Ashkenazi status quo. Unlike their grandparents who had accepted the humiliating terms of Israeli citizenship, they

are reclaiming a non-Ashkenazi identity with its different memories of the past and visions for the future. Implicit in their challenge is the mandate to rethink communal history, recall taboo memories and rewrite their lives.

But the asylum persists. For Shenhav 'the gaps between Israeli-born Ashkenazis and Mizrahim have not decreased in the past thirty years and in some cases have increased'.[43] During the 1990s, Somekh and a group of his established Iraqi friends realised that they were the 'last generation of Jewish Arabs. We therefore attempted to establish a solidarity association with the Iraqi people . . . and to document the cooperation and good neighborliness between the Jews and other Iraqis, so that the coming generations would know about this wonderful connection that had characterized Jewish life in the Arab world for 1,500 years'.[44] They were seeking reconciliation between their memories and identities. For the literary critic Hanan Hever, they were trying to displace the binary opposition between Jews and Arabs onto Baghdad, a site in which Zionist nationality will not fulfill a meaningful function'.[45] Nostalgically celebrating their Iraqi identity and their Arabness, they could finally connect Baghdad with Israel without anxiety. They could demand respect for Jewish Arabs and recognition of their literary contributions to Israeli society.

The asylum is the symptom of Israeli society; it is where terrible histories are captured outside. A repository of memory, the asylum is a *lieu de mémoire* that everyone knows exists, refuses to engage and can remember to forget to remember. That is how it lives on in the mind.

Notes

1. I want to thank Ranjana Khanna, Charlie Piot, Shai Ginsburg, Banu Gokariksel, Erdag Goknar, Ellen McLarney, Sasson Somekh and, of course, Bruce Lawrence for their helpful suggestions for revisions and further readings.
2. He does not use a surname.
3. It is the first of many Hebrew novels about the experiences of Jewish Arabs in 1950s Israel that came to be known as '*sifrut hama'abarah*', or literature of the transit camps.
4. Ammiel Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996, pp. viii–xi.

5. Bryan Turner, 'Managing Religions: State Responses to Religious Diversity', *Contemporary Islam* 1: 2 (2007), pp. 130–1.
6. Some middle-class North African Jews migrated to France after the Second World War. In 1988 Gisele Halimi, a Tunisian lawyer for Algerian freedom fighters, wrote about her childhood as a Jew in Tunisia. Halimi looks back on her life from its humble beginnings in the Goulette fishing port of Tunis, through years of anti-colonial and feminist activism, to her migration to France (Gisele Halimi, *Le lait de l'oranger*, Paris: Gallimard, 1988).
7. Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden*, p. 341, p. 346.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 59–61 and pp. 71–3.
9. The *barzakh*, literally isthmus, 'is never an extreme separation; it is like the line that separates between the sun and its shadow, and like God's saying: He let forth the two seas that meet together, between them a *barzakh* they do not overpass' (Qur'an 55: 19–20).
10. Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 73.
11. Rejwan explains the Biblical reference: 'the exodus of Jews to Babylon in the early sixth century BCE' (Nissim Rejwan, *Outsider in the Promised Land: An Iraqi Jew in Israel*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004, p. 33).
12. Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew*, Jerusalem: Ibis, 2007, p. 181. Originally published 2004 in Hebrew.
13. Original emphasis. Gioirgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 38–43.
14. Moshe Gat, 'The Immigration of Iraqi Jewry to Israel as Reflected in Literature', *Revue Européenne de Migrations Internationales* 14:3 (1998), pp. 52–6.
15. Rejwan, *Outsider in the Promised Land*, p. 113, p. 175.
16. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates*, New York: Anchor Books, 1961, p. 44, p. 21.
17. Ammiel Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing*, p. 238.
18. Nancy Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
19. Somekh, *Baghdad Yesterday*, p. 186.
20. Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden*, p. 186, p. 188, p. 190.
21. In her study of Mizrahi writers, Smadar Lavie has called Israel 'an exilic Arab home for the majority of Israeli Jews, the *Mizrahim*, who immigrated to Israel from third World countries . . . Israel is not home but their diaspora's diaspora' (Smadar Lavie, 'Blow-ups in the Borderzones: Third World Israeli Authors' Gropings for Home', *New Formations* 18 (Winter 1992), p. 85).
22. Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*, p. 81.
23. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973, p. 290, p. 297, p. 275.
24. Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories Diasporic Voices*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 204.
25. When Shlomo Dov Goitein later tried to make sense of this cultural treasure in his five-volume *Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–83), he celebrated the centuries of commerce and interchange among Mediterranean Jews, Muslims and Christians that the Geniza documents revealed.
26. Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp. 124–38.
27. Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden*, pp. 362–3.
28. The term *aliya* means immigrating to Zion. Rejwan, *Outsider in the Promised Land*, p. 191.
29. The famine takes up much of the book with a wife eating her husband's corpse (p. 317).
30. Samir Naqqash, *Shlumu al-kurdi wa ana wa al-zaman* (*Shlomo and I and Time*), Cologne: Al-Kamel Verlag, 2004, p. 46. Further references are given in the text. Translations from Arabic are mine.
31. Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 242.
32. Somekh, *Baghdad Today*, p. 131; see Rejwan, *Outsider in the Promised Land*, p. 132.
33. Conversation with Somekh in Durham, NC on 29 September 2007.
34. Somekh, *Baghdad Yesterday*, pp. 148–53; Rejwan, *Outsider in the Promised Land*, p. 25.
35. Rejwan, *Outsider in the Promised Land*, p. 2, p. 93.
36. Lavie, 'Blow-ups in the Borderzones', p. 94.
37. Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden*, p. 346.
38. Rejwan, *Outsider in the Promised Land*, pp, 89–90.
39. Samir, *Forget Baghdad*, Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktkion, 2002.
40. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, New York: Random House, 1965, pp. 249–50.

41. Lavie was prescient when she wondered in 1992 whether Mizrahi writers could 'use the categorization of race/class attributed to them as a means to mobilize against the Euro-centre' (Lavie, 'Blow-ups in the Borderzones', p. 99).
42. Sami Shalom Chetrit, 'Mizrahi Politics in Israel: Between Integration and Alternative', in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29:4 (2000), p. 51, pp. 59–61.
43. Sami Smooha confirms that the gap between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi communities in Israel is growing. See http://jewishrefugees.blogspot.com/2008/05/iraqi-jews-in-israel-took-long-hard.html (accessed 9 May 2008).
44. Somekh, *Baghdad Yesterday*, pp. 174–5.
45. Hanan Hever, 'Mapping Literary Space: Territory and Violence in Israeli Literature', in Laurence J. Silberstein (ed.), *Mapping Jewish Identities*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, p. 212.

10

Strange Incidents from History: Youssef Rakha and his *Sultan's Seal*

Paul Starkey

Youssef Rakha's *Kitab al-tughra* (*Book of the Sultan's Seal*),[1] his first novel, set in the spring of 2007 and completed at the start of 2010, was published less than a fortnight after mass protests centred on Cairo's Tahrir Square had forced the resignation of the then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011 – a move that prompted the transfer of power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), and everything that has followed since. As Mona Anis observed a few weeks later in *Al-Ahram Weekly*,[2] this may have been an unfortunate rather than a fortunate coincidence, since 'a historical event of such wide import as the Egyptian uprising will naturally overshadow the appearance of any new novel, no matter how accomplished'. Fortunate or not, however, the timing of the novel's publication makes an attempt to relate its appearance to current developments in Egypt and the wider Middle East almost inevitable – not only because of the obvious relevance of its central themes (to which we shall return later) to contemporary developments and debates but also because the setting of much of the work overlaps with that of the uprising itself – an area of central Cairo renamed by Rakha, in his 'alternative map' of the city, 'World's Gate' (*Bab al-dunya*).[3]

The appearance of Rakha's work prompted enthusiastic – not to say hyberbolic – reactions in some literary circles. Mona Anis herself was complementary but restrained, describing the work simply as 'an outstanding