

Rewriting Israeliness

Arabs Writing in Hebrew and Jews Writing in Arabic

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Point of Departure

In the course of the last decade the idea of Zionism, the founding pillar of modern Israel, has been object to harsh disputes and is under attack from many sides. A process of revising and rewriting the Zionist history of the founding years – often indicated as a crucial turning point – caused an intellectual debate over the historical narratives, and challenges Israeli society on many levels. Since the 1990s, the so-called *Post-Zionists*, a new generation of historians and sociologists, have been shaking the moral foundations, which held the state of Israel together for over 50 years. Among other things, these historians demand that today's elitist Jewish state be transformed into a state for all of Israel's citizens, which will on the long run – according to their opponents – question the very existence of Israel as a Jewish State. Notwithstanding this criticism, the agenda of the new historians seems to indicate that the Zionist meta-culture is declining, and competing cultures and countercultures have risen in its place.

The role of native language and literature

It becomes apparent that in the current period of redefinition of ideological and cultural orientations, the question of a native language and literature played – and continues to play – a crucial role. Language is a significant component of identity, a statement on homeland and boundaries. Language is about belonging and it is a central force in the process of nation building. As the culture researcher Itamar Even-Zohar argues: "Language is not only a vehicle of interaction, not only a vehicle of intercommunication, not only a practical tool for state administration in modern or in ancient times; but also a vehicle of symbolic value. By adopting a certain language, a certain population or a certain group in society declares what identity it wants to show to itself as well as to the rest of the world."¹ Looking at the development of Hebrew literature, it is interesting to note, that even before the country actually existed as a realistic option for Jewish immigration, it already was omnipresent and manifest in literature. Over centuries Israel was being described, lamented on and praised, with the yearning desire to return to the 'promised land', the 'land of the fathers'. Today, the transition from a utopian Zionist vision to Israeli reality, a process which is by many in Israeli society perceived as disenchanting, is reflected in cultural currents. Especially literature in Israel can be regarded as a seismograph for cultural and spiritual trends. In modern Israel, many novelists and intellectuals are intensely involved in the public political discourse by

* I would like to thank my friends Nava Semel and Stephan Stetter for their critical and helpful comments on earlier versions of this text.

1 Itamar Even-Zohar, "Language Conflict and National Identity", in: Alpher (ed.), *Nationalism and Modernity: A Mediterranean Perspective*, New York: Praeger 1986, 126-35, 126.

elists and intellectuals are intensely involved in the public political discourse by writing essays and articles in the daily press or actively participating in the peace movement (just to name a few: Amos Oz, who is involved with the peace group *Peace Now* or Yoram Kaniuk, who founded together with Emil Habibi the *Israeli-Palestinian Writers Committee*). In the following, I will briefly discuss the role of modern Hebrew (*Ivrit*) in the process of nation-building and the impact of Hebrew literature on the formation of Israeli national identity and culture. In addition, I will look at two groups of writers in contemporary Israel: the relatively large group of Mizrahi² writers, as well as a much smaller group of Israeli-Arab writers.

Language as a cultural bridge?

Hebrew is the key to Israel's public consciousness and can also function as a cultural bridge, as the example of the independent publishing house *Andalus*, founded in 2000 by the publisher and peace activist Yael Lerer, shows. Whereas *Andalus* is dedicated to the translation of Arabic literature into Hebrew, it should be mentioned here that Arab literature translated into Hebrew is still a marginal phenomenon in Israel.³ The name *Andalus* refers to the site of the Islamic-Jewish 'golden age' in the past, a time of great intellectual and literary output, where Arabic and Jewish cultures fertilized one another. *Andalus* discusses Israel's location within the geographical space, and its objectives are to culturally accommodate Israel within the region. Yael Lerer sees Israel located in the heart of the Arab world, but perceives a lack in the awareness of this fact among Israelis. She explains her motivation to found *Andalus* as filling a vacuum of unawareness among Israelis toward Arabic literature and thereby eliminating a lack of understanding the very neighbors. She notes that since the 1930s only about 30 Arab language fiction have been translated into Hebrew, before *Andalus* began operating: "It is nearly impossible to find translations of narratives that might enable the Hebrew reader to understand Arab societies and the various, complex experiences that shape the lives of the people who comprise them."⁴ Among the works published by *Andalus* is *Bab al-shams* (Gate to the sun) by the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury, which deals with the *nakbah*.⁵ Khoury claims that the IDF committed severe war crimes against the Palestinians and collects a

2 The term 'Mizrahi' meaning 'East' generally denominates those Israeli Jews, the Mizrahim, who arrived from North-Africa (especially Morocco), the Arab states of the Middle East (like Yemen, Iraq, Syria) and the more recent Ethiopian immigration. The term today basically indicates everything 'not-Ashkenazi' among the diverse ethnic groups in Israel and is in fact very imprecise. Bernhard Lewis called this group of non-European Jews 'Jews of Islam', cf. Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, 1984. Jews from central and East European communities are commonly called 'Ashkenazi'. *Ashkenaz* is the Hebrew name for medieval Germany.

3 Among others, *Andalus* has published the following titles: the Moroccan Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone*, the Sudanese Al-Tayyeb Saleh's *The Wedding of Zein*, the Lebanese Elias Khoury's *Gate to the Sun*, two books by the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, *Why Have You Left the Horse Alone* and *State of Siege* and an art catalogue *Self Portrait: Palestinian Women's Art*.

4 Yael Lerer, "About Andalus Publishing", 2002. Cf. also <http://www.andalus.co.il/>, 26.5.2005.

5 Within the Palestinian narrative the 1948 war resulted in *al-nakbah*, the immense catastrophe, since it engendered among other things the loss of homeland, dispersion, and devastation of culture for the Palestinians. The Israelis generally refer to this war as the *War of Independence* or the *1948 War*.

mosaic of Palestinian voices, interwoven with critical reflections on history and remembrance. *Bab al-shams* confronted its Israeli readers with a very complex, historicized Palestinian perspective and addressed the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was published in Israel in February 2002, at a time when the al-Aksa-Intifada and harsh military confrontation was straining the Israeli public mood, it was perceived also beyond the literary supplements since it entered the political discussion. It was reviewed and controversially discussed in various newspapers and Internet news sites, and critics like the acknowledged historian Tom Segev blamed Khoury for unacceptably fusing literary and historical truth. Segev sees in his piece ideological construction rather than a reflective discussion of historical facts.⁶ Elias Khoury comments on Segev's criticism: "He says I pretend that there were massacres in the Galilee, but according to Segev there is no evidence that they really happened, because Benny Morris [an Israeli post-Zionist scholar, AN] is not mentioning them. He said my book is powerful, but he has no reason to believe what I wrote."⁷ Asked, if he has hopes or expectations connected to the publishing of his book in Hebrew, Elias Khoury answered: "I think the major issue of dialogue is to approach the memory of this land, the modern Jewish land. [...] The situation is very tough and dialogue is technically impossible now. [...] I feel my book has no real impact on Israeli intellectuals."⁸ Despite this pessimistic account, *Andalus* makes counter narratives available and thereby contributes to the Israeli public discussion about the content of Israeliness⁹ – namely modern Israeli identity.

Language as a vehicle for identity formation

Leaving the subject of translation from Arabic into Hebrew aside, and turning towards literature written in Israel by Mizrahim and Israeli Arabs, another major challenge to Israeliness becomes apparent, as I will show in greater detail below. Looking at the Israeli literary scene today, it is confronted with a phenomenon, even if somewhat marginal, of non-Jewish Israelis writing in Hebrew. That is not to say, however, that all Israeli-Arab literature has been written in Hebrew. Especially the decision by the two authors, Anton Shammas and Sayed Kashua, who chose to write in their 'stepmother tongue' Hebrew, caused a vivid public debate. Before taking a closer look at this debate, I will describe the tool they both use for their work. The harsh positions involved in this debate can only be fully grasped by looking at the integral role modern Hebrew played as means for identity formation during the formative years of the State of Israel. Thus, in the modern era, the revival of ancient Hebrew was a central concern of the Zionist movement. The Jewish communities in the Diaspora used ancient Hebrew only as a written language in their prayers and religious studies. Hebrew was not used for every-

6 Tom Segev, "Roman Arawi" (Arab Novel), in: *Ha'aretz* (Hebrew edition), 4.3.2002.

7 Interview with Elias Khoury, 9.6.2002, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

8 Ibid.

9 The secular concept of Israeliness originates from the idea that Jewishness is not only a religious, but also a national identity. The Israeliness to which I refer in the following is a set of attitudes, a state of mind, mentality and a cultural entity, which is shared by a large group of Israelis.

day conversations, but rather Yiddish, Ladino or the particular language of the country of residence.

Ivrith, a revived ancient language, was a vehicle for Israel's nation building and for the formation of the identity of the 'New Jew,' disconnected from the past. In the founding years of the state, Hebrew was not only a language: It was both used as a noun and as an adjective, symbolizing the 'new.' 'Hebrew' broadly substituted the adjective 'Jewish,' which was associated with the 'old' world of the Diaspora. The adjective 'Hebrew' was transformed into a noun, representing the Zionist mold for casting the 'New Hebrew,' the pioneer. In those days of an emerging cultural entity, expressions like 'Tel Aviv – the first Hebrew city,' the 'Hebrew nation' in Palestine, 'Hebrew workers' and 'Hebrew army' and 'the Hebrews' entered the Israeli public discourse. Yet – to complete the picture – in constant search for a cultural framework to belong to, the new Hebrew pioneers also flavored the Hebrew language with Arabic terms, started to wear traditional Arab clothing and adapted local habits of cooking. The writer Yoram Kaniuk looks back into the times of the founding of the state and recalls a certain fascination with 'everything Arabic': "In the *Palmach* [elite striking force of the *Haganah*, an underground military organization, AN] and even before, we all tried to learn from the Arabs who were the original, the natives, not in culture but in manners: for example – the *kafiyeh* [Arab headdress, AN], the many Arabic curses, the coffee drinking, the words like 'Yalla', 'Ahalan', and so on."¹⁰ Further, artistic expressions of the time in painting, literature and music indicate that in the quest for an authentic expression of a native culture the 'native Arab', the local, the Bedouin, or the oriental Jew would serve as some sort of a role model. Zionist settlers drew on the Orient as a source for an idyllic, harmonious setting. They believed that the Arabs, who inhabited the land, preserved some sort of a pure and authentic way of life, resembling ancient biblical images. This illustrates the yearning of the 'new Hebrew' to adapt the nativeness of the Arab, who was often perceived as the pre-exilic Jew in the ancient homeland, who fuses with the environment. The Hebrew pioneer was torn between the longing to preserve Western cultural heritage, and at the same time, behave like a local and blend into the imagery in order to feel 'at home' in the old-new homeland. The duality within Israeli culture to merge into the East and become part of it, while concomitantly being distinguished from it in order to preserve Western cultural heritage, is until today at the center of the discussion about Israeli identity. While the somewhat romanticized description of a dialectic relationship between Arabs and 'Hebrews' is relevant for the understanding of this period, it is important to mention that reality at this time was also characterized by harsh political conflicts and an emerging inferiority-superiority relation.

The revival of ancient Hebrew is credited to the Zionist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who believed that the Jews should return to their ancient homeland and begin anew to speak their own language. When he immigrated to Palestine in 1881, he found neither ethnic nor religious homogeneity, nor unity of cultural codes. In the course of the first waves

10 Yoram Kaniuk, "Why I flirted with the Canaanite-Idea", personal correspondence with the author 2002.

of immigration to Eretz Israel by the end of the 19th century, Ben-Yehuda recognized the urgent need to create a common language for this ethnically diverse society that came into being in Palestine. According to Ben-Yehuda, a commonly spoken language should serve as social glue and as a means for the creation of national culture and literature. Indeed, the revival of Hebrew as a modern language created a common ground for a heterogeneous society that consists of a mixture from many cultures, diverse memories and different pasts. By contrast it is interesting to note that Theodor Herzl never envisioned the future Jewish state as being Hebrew-speaking and continued to promote, especially in his utopian novel *Altneuland* (1902), German to be the common language of all Jews living in Israel. However, Herzl's aspiration to create a 'Vienna at the Yarkon river', as a popular saying goes, was never a realistic option for the future Jewish state, located at the Mediterranean shore. Today, Hebrew is a lively and fast developing language with rich vocabulary, which grew from about 8.000 words in biblical Hebrew to about 120.000 words in *Ivriyth*.¹¹ Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, Hebrew is also the first official national language. Even though Arabic is the second official language, it always stayed the 'second class language' or even the language of an 'inferior culture', mainly spoken by Israel's enemies.

New currents in Israeli literature

Being forced to move from one place to the other, to live in a new country and to settle in a different state, raises fundamental questions about home, belonging and identity. This state of being is often labeled with the term 'exile' and generally describes the forced absence of one's home or country, as well as a discontinuation of the long-established state of being. This condition of uprootedness and dual existence in two worlds, the old and the new home, has strong emotional consequences for the individual. Especially for writers who grew up in an Arab speaking country and later came to Israel the difficult language issue was raised upon their arrival in Israel. Literary scholar Ammiel Alcalay has gathered numerous references in his long overdue compilation of literature in the Levant, *After Jews and Arabs* (1993), and his anthology of contemporary Israeli writers with family roots in the Arab world, *Keys to the Garden* (1996). From the 1970s on, he determines a "veritable explosion of creativity emerging from mizrahi consciousness",¹² being convinced that some of the most vibrant elements in contemporary Israeli literature originate from authors with an oriental background. Their contributions to the debates on remembrance, the search for identity, and language – not to mention their role in discussions on the reevaluation of the past and minority-majority relations – are, according to Alcalay, of central importance in the development of a specifically Israeli culture. "The work of these writers has, and continues to have, a tremendous impact on the direction Israeli culture as a whole can take, an impact that

11 Anat Feinberg, *Kultur in Israel. Eine Einführung*, Gerlingen: Bleicher 1993, 59.

12 Ammiel Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden. New Israeli Writing*, London: University of Minnesota Press 1996, viii.

cannot be measured by opinion polls but one whose true implications have barely been recognized or acknowledged.”¹³

Nevertheless, the literary manifestations of Mizrahi writers are as diverse as their contributors and the group as a whole and cannot be univocally labeled as the writings of ‘oriental Jews’: “Some came from the secularized urban professional classes of Cairo, Damascus, and Bagdad; others were shopkeepers with a traditional religious outlook; and still others came from small towns and villages that had hardly been touched by industrial life.”¹⁴ As diverse as this group may be, it becomes apparent that topics like identity construction, extensive family sagas, features of sensuousness and exoticness, as well as post-colonial subjunctives enhance the process of reassessing and rediscovering the long marginalized fields of literary expression. Analyzing the terms and categories involved in the discussion of modern Hebrew literature, Nancy E. Berg also finds it problematic to categorize Mizrahi writers as a unity, due to the great diversity within the group. In the end, Berg argues, the only commonality they have is the way “the mainstream readership/establishment responds to them.” Also the fact that these writers are labeled as ‘ethnic’ writers – “using the term here in a uniquely Israeli sense where nothing Ashkenazi is ethnic” – binds them from the beginning on in a certain discussion about ethnicity and otherness. “If we persist in reading them as ethnic, we deny them full voice, miss much of their texture, and may, on occasion, invert their meaning.” She argues further that the ethnic label nevertheless becomes less and less of a marker, since the authors under observation here entered the literary arena, moved from the margins towards the center and broke out of the one-dimensional ethnic category.

Looking at the developments in the literary field as a whole, beyond the categorization of Mizrahi and Ashkenazi origin, the young generation of writers is indeed a factor that reshapes the literary map in Israel and rewrites the Zionist narrative. The enormous pluralism in the writing of this young generation precludes making generalizations; however an emergence of sub-national identities and cultures can be observed, which is giving more attention to individual aspects of identity formation and indigenous culture. Personal and human encounters, the coping with the *mazav*, meaning the political situation,¹⁵ and the uncertainty of daily life, dominate this new wave of writing. The heroes and characters are not being reflected on in a political or national framework, they are rather individuals, trying to master the challenges of daily life and being caught up in their private worlds. The collective ‘we’, characteristic for literary expressions of the *dor ba-aretz*,¹⁶ is now being replaced by the individualistic ‘I’. Unlike their literary

13 The long ignored literature of the Mizrahim is discussed in the anthology, *ibid.*, xi.

14 Alan Mintz, “Introduction”, in: id. (ed.), *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction*, London: Brandeis University Press 1997, 9.

15 Cf. the collection of analytical essays and personal statements by artists, journalists and writers on the current political situation and its impact on daily life, Gideon Samet (ed.), *Ha-mazav, akhshaw* (Israel: Where Things Stand, Now), Or Yehuda: Zmora-Bitan 2003.

16 In the forming years of the Israeli state, the mainstream literary expression was called *dor ba-aretz* (generation in the land) referring to the native-born children of immigrants that began to publish in

predecessors this group, outfitted by their parents with relative economic well-being and the illusion of security, is taking the existence of the state of Israel for granted. In addition, by the choice of their supposedly shallow topics this group is undermining the ideological values of the *dor ba-aretz* writers. The literary critic Miri Kubovy comments: "There is a deep feeling of being lost after the destruction of all the myths and of all social and national agendas of progress. In the past there were meta-narratives that gave hope for a better future, and people sacrificed everything for that future with feelings of heroism and elation. The present young generation has been witnessing the bitter disillusionment and deep disappointment of the previous generations."¹⁷

The choice of language

Looking closer into the deep link of language and identity, the documentary essay *Forget Baghdad*, filmed in 2002 by exiled Iraqi Samir, illuminates this deep conflict of Iraqi Jews. Samir's subtle portraits of novelists, who grew up in Baghdad and immigrated to Israel in the late 1940s and early 1950s, break the existing clichés and blur the ethnic boundaries. Personal stories of writers like Shimon Ballas, Sami Michael and Samir Naqqash elucidate the problematic identity formation upon their arrival in Israel: The late Samir Naqqash continued to write his novels in Arabic, which made him an outsider in Israel, but made his books quite successful in Arab countries like Egypt and Iraq. He received wide-ranging acclaim in the Arab world and particularly among the Iraqi exile community, but his books were little known in Israel, and only one of his 13 works was translated into Hebrew. After a long exile in Great Britain Naqqash returned to Israel and died, disregarded and embittered, in September 2004. Shimon Ballas, who switched to writing in Hebrew in the mid-1960s, sees his mission today in bringing Israel closer to the East. He sees himself as a product of Arab culture and controversially labels himself today as an "Arab Jew",¹⁸ thereby illustrating his inner struggle. The literary critic Hanan Hever comments on this contradictory self-definition: "In contrast to Israeli identity, which appears as natural, homogeneous, local, and above all, universal, Ballas raises a possibility that is explicitly heterogeneous: the option of being local yet simultaneously an immigrant from the East – a 'doubly realized' reality, as Ballas put it."¹⁹ In addition, essential questions concerning space, locality, home and being 'in the region' are raised and the perception of Jewish ethno-national unity is being splintered. It becomes evident that European Jews and Jews from Arab countries, in this case from Iraq, do not share a common history, but rather different pasts. As Shimon Ballas explains: "I am not in conflict with the environment, I came from the

the late 1930s. The group of well-established veteran writers dominated the literary tone in the first decades.

17 Miri Kubovy, "Inniut and Kooliut. Trends in Israeli Narrative Literature, 1995-1999", in: *Israel Studies* 2000, 251.

18 Dalia Karpel, "An Arab Jew", in: *Ha'aretz* (English edition), 2.7.2003.

19 Hanan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse*, New York: University Press 2002, 166.

Arab environment, and I remain in constant colloquy with the Arab environment. I also didn't change my environment. I just moved from one place to another within in it."²⁰

Hebrew did not stay a language exclusively spoken by the Jewish-Israeli parts of society and used by Jewish-Israeli writers. A large number of Israeli-Arabs learned Hebrew, which is necessary for their daily life in Israel. Moreover, Hebrew is omnipresent in the public sphere, in radio broadcasts and on television, whereas Arabic stays the secluded language of a minority. Also, Arabic is not compulsory at Jewish schools, and the vast majority of Israeli Jews do not speak the language. Interestingly enough quite a few Arab words, mainly curses and swear words, have nonetheless been adapted to slang spoken modern Hebrew and for that reason also into modern Hebrew literature. This fact shows that Hebrew language today is in constant transition as it is undergoing massive innovations and adapting influences by the different groups of immigrants, after being restricted to the liturgical and religious realm for centuries. It should be mentioned at this point that also the process of Americanization in Israeli life finds its various expressions in spoken language and contemporary literature: English is being intertwined into contemporary literary Hebrew and gives the speaker an illusion of status, being urbane and up-to-date. Thus Miri Kubovy sees the Americanization of contemporary Hebrew literature as a component in a complex process that includes both Israeli phenomena and global cultural developments.²¹

Arabs writing in Hebrew

A particularly interesting case are 'Israeli-Arabs' – a term indicating those Palestinians who remained within the borders of the state when Israel was founded in 1948 – who chose to write in Hebrew, despite Arabic being their native language. The specific case of the Hebrew language being used as a creative tool by non-Jewish Israelis has been object to heated and highly ideologized debates in Arab countries, as well as in Israeli society. Although these authors are not part of the Hebrew mainstream, they have reached a central place within the discussion of Israeli identity and succeeded in re-mapping the Israeli cultural space. "However, they both [Anton Shammas and Emil Habibi, AN] succeeded in transforming the margin from a position of weakness and silence to one of resistance and power."²² The trigger for this dispute certainly was Anton Shammas' poetic novel *Arabeskot*, which is characterized by a complex Hebrew style, enriched by Talmudic and biblical underlayers. Anton Shammas, a Christian-Arab born in the Galilee, published this novel in 1986. Prior to this, he had published two poetry collections (*Hardcover* in 1974 and *No Man's Land* in 1979), as well as a children's book in Hebrew. It was mainly *Arabeskot* which provoked intense emotions in Israeli society, as well as in the Arab world. He was not the first Arab to write a novel in Hebrew, but his work certainly was the first to arouse such heated discussions and

20 Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden*, 68.

21 Cf. Kubovy, "Inniut and Kooliut".

22 Laurence J. Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates. Knowledge and Power in Israeli Culture*, New York, London: Routledge 1999, 129.

managed to shape Israeli public discourse.²³ In addition, he worked as a translator from Arabic to Hebrew and published nonfiction articles in Israeli newspapers, thereby enabling a Palestinian voice, dealing with questions of culture, identity and nationhood, to reach a broad audience. As Ammiel Alcalay put it: “In making Hebrew a lingua franca that just happens to dominate this particular region for the time being – and which can be used, due to political and cultural vicissitudes, by anyone who happens to be trapped within such circumstances – Shammass has pulled the proverbial finger out of the dike damming the basic contradiction within the definition of Israeli nationality and nationhood.” He continues saying that Israel now needs to come to terms with a major challenge to the Zionist narrative: a Christian Palestinian writing in Hebrew “who also claims [...] to form a distinct part of this nationality.”²⁴

One often repeated accusation by Israeli critics was that Shammass, a representative of a colonized minority, confronted and subverted the Israeli ‘elite culture’ by their own language, thus transforming the language of the majority into a weapon in the struggle over cultural hegemony.²⁵ In contrast to Shammass, the late Christian-Arab author Emil Habibi from Haifa used Arabic for his poetry and novels, and only composed some non-fictional newspaper articles in Hebrew. Most of his writings were made accessible to a wider Jewish Israeli audience by translation into Hebrew.²⁶ Habibi was, in 1992, the first – and so far only – Arab to receive the Israel Prize for Literature. 16 years after Anton Shammass, another Hebrew novel by Sayed Kashua, a young Israeli-Arab, was published in Israel. Whereas Shammass wrote in Arabic as well as in Hebrew, Kashua chose to write only in Hebrew. His debut *Dancing Arabs* is the account of the failed assimilation of a young Israeli-Arab in the Arabic as well as in the Israeli parts of society and carries strong autobiographical parallels. His second novel *And there was Morning* was published in Israel in 2003. Sayed Kashua, born 1975 in Beit Safafa, a suburb of Jerusalem, is a journalist and has a column in the trendy Tel Aviv city magazine *Iton Ha’ir*. He uses his ‘slangish’ and up-to-date Hebrew most naturally like a native speaker and blends right into the general atmosphere in public discourse.

Arabs who choose to express themselves in Hebrew, their stepmother tongue, instead of Arabic make a powerful, provocative and controversial statement. Why Hebrew, the Jewish national language? As Ami Elad-Bouskila pointed out, it is not just another language chosen as a second language next to Arabic, as in the *mahjar* literature, the literature of the émigrés to America, who began to write in the language of their new local

23 The first Palestinian to write a novel in Hebrew was the journalist Attalah Mansur. Cf. *ibid.*, 229. In addition, the Druze writers Naim Arayde and Salman Natur wrote in Hebrew before Anton Shammass, thereby paving the way for Arab native speakers to write in Hebrew. However, they never reached broad attention, which can be explained with the difficult position of Druze within the Arab community in Israel.

24 Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs. Remaking Levantine Culture*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press 1993.

25 Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates*.

26 Habibi’s works have been made accessible to the Jewish-Israeli reading audience by translation by no other than Anton Shammass. This fact stresses again Shammass’ contribution to the challenge of the dominant Jewish Israeli culture by introducing counter-narratives from the margins of society.

communities.²⁷ An Israeli-Arab, who decides to write in the language of ‘the Other’, makes a strong political point and is vulnerable to critique both from within and without. Many questions arise: What kind of literature are we confronted with? Should it be labeled as modern Hebrew literature or Arabic literature? The Israeli critic might ask: Is this an attempt to undermine Jewish hegemony over Hebrew? Palestinian society might condemn the poet as a traitor, writing in the language of the oppressor and neglecting his own cultural heritage by trying to assimilate to the dominant culture.

Trying to answer the complex questions that arise, we soon realize the limitations of prefabricated categories. In a world where the prefix ‘post’ dominates intellectual debates, dichotomies are often shattered and considered obsolete. The ‘post-discourse’ developed theories of cultural hybridity, raised issues of the ‘in-betweens’ and the ‘beyond’. Moreover, in our case ostensible oppositional poles like Hebrew/Arabic, colonizer/oppressed, minority/majority, inside/outside tend to become fuzzy at the edges. The examples of Israeli-Arabs writing in Hebrew, and especially the rising awareness in the Israeli public discourse for this literature, are proof of a continuous blurring of boundaries and formerly harshly disputed linguistic territory.

Breaking the clichés

Jews writing in Arabic or Arabs writing in Hebrew – these writers of different generations received different reactions to their work, and their oeuvre cannot *per se* be judged by the choice of language they preferred. Samir Naqqash’s continuous usage of Arabic made him an outsider in Israel’s literary scene, whereas Emil Habibi, as mentioned above, entered and shaped the Israeli public discourse after his work had been translated into Hebrew. Right from the start, Sayed Kashua – writing only in Hebrew – was celebrated as the ‘shooting star’ of contemporary Hebrew literature and as the ‘new Arab voice’. However, all of these writers discussed so far are undermining existing clichés about *the Jew* and *the Arab* as a prototype. As Ami Elad-Bouskila pointed out: “Efforts to understand why these authors chose to write also in Hebrew indicate that they did it less out of a desire ‘to strike the Achilles heel’ and more out of a desire to be integrated in Israeli culture and its emerging identity, each author for his or her own reasons.”²⁸ In addition, poets write in the language they feel they can express themselves best, so it is also an aesthetic and highly individualistic decision, which cannot easily be politicized. In a sense, it is not the author who chooses the language; it is maybe the language, which chooses the author.

Sayed Kashua affirms this point, and – when being asked about his motivation for the choice of language in an interview – stresses the fact that he wishes to blend into the mainstream:

27 Ami Elad-Bouskila, “Arabs Writing in Hebrew: Modification and Affirmation of Norm”, paper given at the conference *Poetry’s Voice – Society’s Norms. Forms of Interaction between Middle Eastern Writers and their Societies*, Berlin, 16.-18.11.2003.

28 Ami Elad-Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture*, London, Portland: Frank Cass 1999, 46f.

For several reasons I wrote my first novel in Hebrew. First of all, there are barely Arabic publishing houses in Israel. Secondly, I wanted to turn to the majority of Israelis and be part of this group. Everything I do, I do out of my inferiority complex. I wanted to impress the Israeli elite. In order to influence, you have to write in Hebrew. It was not my intention to write a book that merely 50 Arabs would read and hate. In addition, I studied Hebrew from elementary school on and wrote for Hebrew papers. Since I turned 15 I only read Hebrew literature. It is much easier for me to write in Hebrew.²⁹

It becomes apparent that Kashua, by the conscious choice of a very ‘slangish’, up-to-date Hebrew, not only wants to enter the public discourse, but also has very personal reasons to write in Hebrew: He actively tries to integrate into the Jewish society.

In contrast to that Anton Shammas, asked the same question in 1988, answers provocatively:

What I’m trying to do – mulishly, it seems – is to un-Jew the Hebrew language (to use a Philip Roth verb), to make it more Israeli and less Jewish, thus bringing it back to its Semitic origins, to its Place. This is a parallel to what I think the state should be. As English is the language of those who speak it, so is Hebrew; and so the state should be the state of those who live in it, not for those who play with its destiny with a remote control in hand.³⁰

Shammas stresses the place, the Israeli *locus* and thereby underlines the link between language, place and citizenship. His argument paved the way for post-Zionist ideology, which demands a state for all of Israel’s citizens.

Content of Israeliness

The literary works mentioned above develop within a context of competing national narratives. The case of Israeli-Arabs writing in Hebrew is a cultural phenomenon full of contradictions, overlappings and inconsistencies, where many unanswered questions arise: Can the work possibly be acknowledged and judged by the reading audience and the critics as a literary expression, or will it always be first and foremost a political provocation? Are Sayed Kashua’s novels a subversive statement, or a natural process of melting in? He certainly confuses the delicate balance of power between majority and minority discourse – and confuses the familiar balance within the literary scene of the Jewish State. He also raises crucial questions: Can literary Hebrew possibly be a resource shared with the Arab minority in Israel? Does Hebrew, the vehicle for identity formation among Jewish Israelis, thereby lose its image of singularity? Kashua’s work can be seen as manifestation of the continuous Israelization of the Israeli-Arabs, despite the Zionist ideology which ensures preferential treatment for Jews. Kashua’s work might also be interpreted as an expression of a new self-consciousness of a young generation of Israeli-Arab writers. Since it gained statehood, Israel has been a country in constant search of an integrative model for society. Over the years, different variants for Israel’s national and cultural identity have been the subject of heated debates. I argue that Sayed Kashua’s work should also be seen as a contribution to the discussion on the

29 Igal Avidan, “Hebräisch als Stiefmutterssprache. Interview mit dem arabischen Israeli Sayed Kashua, der als Schriftsteller in Israel gefeiert wird”, in: *Das Parlament*, 4.11.2002.

30 Anton Shammas quoted in: Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates*.

content of Israeliness that struggles over the question: ‘What should constitute native, local culture?’ The concept of Israeliness originates from the idea that national identity is characterized by a set of attitudes, a state of mind, mentality and a cultural entity that is shared by a large group of Israelis. Itamar Even-Zohar describes the inconsistencies and contradictions occurring, while trying to specify the content of Israeliness: “The dynamics of life has led the culture of the Israelis into various directions, making the new invented Hebrew culture to be only one single component in a mosaic of ingredients stemming from various different sources, heterogeneous, un-unified and incompatible.”³¹ Baghdad-born veteran writer Sami Michael sees in Israeliness a concept that connects and unites, despite all contradiction, and optimistically comments on this subject:

Yes, something beautiful emerged that the Israeli have not realized yet. The Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, the religious and secular, the Jews and Arabs in the country have, unconsciously, created something shared, that I call ‘Israeliness.’ It is crazy, mad, stupid, but everybody likes it and lives it. That gives hope, despite the many conflicts.³²

Conclusion

The intriguing examples discussed here show the entangled histories that accompany the phenomenon of non-Jewish Israeli writing in Hebrew and represent yet another feature in a period of difficult redefinition of ideological and cultural orientations in modern Israel. As a consequence of the continuous outbursts of violence, the deteriorating security situation and growing Anti-Semitism worldwide, a new national consensus among the heterogeneous groups surfaced and superficially obscured the existing cleavages among Israeli Jews. This results in a strong feeling of togetherness – or tribal siege mentality – among Israeli Jews, which on the other hand intensified the rift between Arab and Jewish citizens. This new consensus, often labeled as ‘neo-Zionist thought’, is accompanied by a general political swing to the right: As a consequence thereof, a repression of leftist and liberal thought and a comeback of national-conservative values can be observed. Especially in times of harsh political confrontation the importance of Arabs writing in Hebrew and thereby raising awareness among Israelis toward Arabic living conditions and bridging over the very neighbors cannot be overestimated. The works under discussion here can form an important cultural bridge between two cultures by representing an alternative reality to the everyday reality of Israeli Jews. Especially Kashua exposes modern daily life of an Israeli-Arab to a broader audience and provides valuable information to many Israelis on the life conditions of the minority among them. Evoking many autobiographical allusions he deals extensively with the tragedy of an Israeli-Arab who is trying to live in Israel. The late writer and journalist Batya Gur states: “*Dancing Arabs* is a monologue that scrolls through the Israeli Arabs’ desire to belong.”³³ She also describes a key scene, where the hero of *Dancing Arabs* is being

31 Cf. Itamar Even-Zohar, “Who is afraid of the Hebrew Culture?”, in: *Papers in Culture Research*, 2004, 11 (<http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/works/papers/papers/Hebrew-Culture-Revisited.pdf>).

32 Quoted in Gisela Dachs, “Außenseiter aus Überzeugung”, in: *Die Zeit*, 14.2.2002.

33 Batya Gur, “Dancing in the dark”, in: *Ha’aretz* (English edition), 8.2.2002.

absorbed by the reading of a novel by Thomas Bernhard, while he is waiting for his wife in the waiting room of a Jewish hospital. For Batya Gur this is a moment of hope and reconciliation: “All of a sudden the Israeli reader – especially if he himself has problems of belonging – discovers the real common denominator between him and an Arab Israeli who loves literature.”³⁴ Nevertheless – a statement by Sayed Kashua himself makes clear, that his wish to integrate, to become part of the majority discourse and to influence the public debate on Israeliness, until now, is but wishful thinking: “I have learned to confront one day at a time, without dreams or hopes, and without the slightest ability to control my fate. I have learned to live in a fog, with a feeling that there has not as yet been a final decision about my status – citizen or enemy – or about where I am allowed to live now, and where I will be allowed to live a year from now.”³⁵

34 Ibid.

35 Sayed Kashua, “Give in – and win”, in: *Ha'aretz* (English edition), 24.9.2004.