

The Ramshackle House: Who Does Arabic Belong to When It Is Present in Literature?

THOUGHTS ABOUT LITERATURE, ARABIC, AND HEBREW

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OF ALL THE QUESTIONS ONE MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE PRESENCE — how present it is, if at all—of Arabic in Hebrew culture, and more specifically in Hebrew literature, the one that preoccupies me most is the question of belonging, of ownership. In other words, to whom does Arabic belong when it *is* present in literature? Who owns it, how, and for what purpose? To whom does Arabic occur in literature when it *does* occur — to whom does it happen? I recall a casual comment by the poet Nurit Zarchi, as she tried to explain her reservations about the Israeli authors generally known as “the State Generation.” “My problem with books written by authors of that generation,” Zarchi told me, “is that the bad things in them almost always happen to other people. People who are totally different. Not to themselves. Almost never to a narrative authority who says ‘I.’”

If there is any concern as to my intentions at this point, I shall try to alleviate it. What I am suggesting is certainly not that Arabic is a bad thing that might happen to someone in — or outside — Hebrew literature; perhaps the opposite is true, despite what several of our speedy legislators believe. The question, rather, is: to whom does Arabic occur within the fabric of fiction, realistic or otherwise? What responsibility does the author take for this Arabic, and how does Arabic resonate in the novel or story? Does it occur, for example, to Moïshe, the soldier in S. Yizhar’s wonderful realistic novel *Khirbet Khizeh*, who tells a banished Arab man, “Yalla imshi wa’llah ya’tik, ya Khawaja” (Get out of here, and may God grant you favor, sir), or, for instance, to Orli Castel-Bloom’s protagonist in her unrealistic story “Ummi Fi Shughl,” who says over and over again, as if pleading for her life, “Ummi fi shughl” (My mother is at work)?

In this essay I shall not attempt to sketch a climate map of Hebrew literature showing regions of Arabic but will confine myself to an observation, which is also a testimony, of literary cases in which the first-person narrator might conceivably say and write, “Ummi fi shughl.” Namely,

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הבית-הרעוע-של-מי-הערבית-כשהיא-כבר-נוכחת-בספרות-מחשבות-על-ספרות-על-ערבית-ועל-עברית/

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Orli Castel-Bloom's writing and my own: Mizrahi writers, native-born Israelis from Egyptian immigrant families, who began publishing in the 1980s and in whose writing at that time, at least in my case, there was a certain echo of *ummi fi shughl*. But not yet the thing itself, not yet *ummi fi shughl* verbatim.

I have been thinking a great deal about Orli Castel-Bloom's story recently, in part because reviewing it provided me with a bridge of sorts, or an intermediary, by means of which I could reach the slightly suspect and ungrateful thing I have tried to do here: self-analysis. The story illuminated the ways in which I must contend, with varying degrees of intensity, with what I am referring to as "Arabic inside Hebrew." It seems almost needless to mention, but nevertheless is worth noting, that at the moment of writing, the core of this contending remains unformulated, inexplicit. It stems from a profound source of linguistic, social, and psychological discomfort and is in fact related to an urge or a system of urges that is itself the story's conceptual mechanism of action.

What I call "the mechanism of action" is the powerful and contradictory motion of two forces that hurtle toward each other in Castel-Bloom's story. The first owes its existence to, and operates within, what is generally known as "identity politics," from which there is no escape and which we know all too well; it encompasses the identity brandings of Jew, Arab, and Mizrahi and what we derive from these identity brandings. The second force is entirely opposed to identity politics, seeks to empty it of its content, to crumble and even crush it. It should perhaps be emphasized that none of the slightly mysterious things I have posited about the contradictory motion in Castel-Bloom's story would have been so alive and active for us readers without the presence of Arabic. The point of connection and quasi fusion between the Arabic and Hebrew words in the story is akin to stitches, or to a scar left on one's body by a surgeon.



Even a reader encountering this story for the first time would likely notice the intersections — intentionally underscored and rendered somewhat awkward by the author — between Hebrew and Arabic. The Arabic appears almost out of nowhere (I write "almost" because what anticipates the Arabic in the story, and essentially serves as the opener for a conversation between mother and daughter, is the question the mother asks as she crouches under the park bench: "What's your ethnic background?"), a nowhere that lacks psychological, social, or political context. And the appearance of this Arabic, just like the appearance of the mother who speaks it, is something akin to a snakebite. It bites the reader with its sharp transition, its abruptness, the absurd series of questions and answers between the mother and the narrator-daughter, which reads like a conversation between the deaf. Their exchange resembles an interrogation, except that the roles switch back and forth and it is unclear who is interrogating whom. The place where the story converts itself into Arabic is dizzying. The story seems to swirl around itself and crack, collapse into something else, into a completely different logic, the logic of dreaming rather than wakefulness. With its tenuous connection to the meaning and content of the conversation between the mother and the daughter (which concerns issues of identification and identity, of who is who, and of what one's role in the world is and where one is located by virtue of this role), the sudden performance of Arabic seems like coercion, like a lack of choice. The Arabic here imposes itself on the narrator, who is literally forced to speak it, to extricate it from a dark and mute place. Arabic emerges from the text as it emerges from the protagonist, almost violently, cracking the text and leaving the site of the fraction intact, without any attempt on the narrator's part to mend or blur it. It would

not be an exaggeration to argue, following Kristeva, that the emergence of Arabic in the Hebrew surface of Castel-Bloom's story is symptomatic of the text's subconscious rather than the author's.



Nevertheless, I would like to take a moment to pose this question: what is especially unusual about the appearance of Arabic in Hebrew, in a story written in Hebrew? What is particular about it? Why is the rift or the crack created by the invasion of Arabic into Hebrew very different, or slightly different, from the crack or rift formed by any other foreign language — English, French, or, of course, Yiddish? To put it more bluntly: why is waving the Arabic flag in a Hebrew setting even perceived as flag-waving? And if it is, then exactly which flag is it and to whom does it belong?

It would surprise no one if I were to claim that every moment and every note in the appearance of Arabic in Hebrew, whether in Castel-Bloom's story or in S. Yizhar's, in a poem by Avot Yeshurun or in my own work, notwithstanding the enormous differences between them, never appears alone. It is neither isolated nor innocent, not even when it stems from a place of innocence, inasmuch as it is opaque to itself. It is always trailed by a long line of friends and relations, pots and pans, wagons loaded with chattels — in short: problematics. The problematics of Mizrahi Jews, of Arab Jews, of the children of Arab Jews and of the children of those who do not see themselves as Arab Jews; the problematics of the Jewish-Arab conflict; the problematics of Israeli identity in the Middle East; and the many variations of how things are situated within all these problematics. The friction created by Arabic's invasion and its appearance within Hebrew, therefore, can almost never remain within the confines of private memory — however nostalgic it might be — because it instantly escalates every layer of the text to extremely urgent questions of identification, identity, and location. It forces the text to take sides and provide a response, vague though it may be, regarding its identity and its position within all these problematics.

That is exactly what Castel-Bloom's story does, perhaps not unlike a story I myself wrote in the early 1990s, "St. John the Divine," in which Arabic appeared for the first time in my writing. Both stories provide a fairly nebulous answer to questions of identity and Mizrahi location, but they do provide one.

Their answer primarily concerns the impossibility or the unwillingness to provide clear and logical answers to questions of Mizrahi identity and Mizrahi location. Not only because they wish to escape the linguistic and cognitive trap of the question "What's your ethnic background?" Rather, they are unwilling and unable to answer because the real stuff their answer is made of, the stuff their emotional location is made of, is found deep in the murky waters of childhood and in the fluidity and vagueness of concepts and impressions formed in childhood. Arabic, therefore, in both these stories, emerges hand in hand with childhood, not necessarily the biographical fact-based one but the emotional category called childhood. I would even go so far as to say that it is not possible for the category named "Israeli childhood" to exist without Arabic.

The woman-girl narrator in Castel-Bloom's story repeatedly recites the absurd line "Ummi fi shughl" to her mother, even though she is not at *shughl* at all. And the woman-girl narrator in "St. John the Divine" joins her father on a surreal journey of atonement in New York, where he searches for the sister he abandoned in Egypt. Both characters return to the childish space embodied in the appearance of Arabic as it is practically imposed on them by the Mizrahi parent who is needy, abandoned, demanding, impoverished, accusatory, and pleading for redemption or atonement.

But that is not the only overlap between these two literary cases, so different in their *modus operandi*, their language, and their poetic conclusions. I must point out, furthermore, that while reading these two stories alongside each other recently, I was struck by a sense of discovery when I reached the last line of Castel-Bloom's story, a cry of "Ya sater ya rab" (God help us). Yes, this is another overlap: both stories end with an appeal to God.

I am referring here not to literary influence in the usual sense of the term but to something more far-reaching, which has to do with the cornerstones of the stories' materials and the assemblage of imagery that appears in them both. They attest not necessarily to literary similarities but to a similar molecular composition of the biographical, social, and political air inhaled by authors of the same generation, children of Mizrahi immigrants — Castel-Bloom and I, in this case — whose first formative decade was the 1960s in Israel.

But neither story has a time. They occur in a supratemporality of the soul, in Freud's "timelessness of the unconscious." Furthermore, they occur in distant, removed spaces. In my story the space is New York, in Castel-Bloom's it is the neighborhood park. In both there is a quasi encounter between the narrator and the Mizrahi parent, who insists on using any means — both reasonable and not — to drag the girl-narrator by her hair into his or her world and values and, most importantly, into his or her language: Arabic. It is perhaps worth noting that my narrator shaves her hair at some point in the story. In both stories there are references to the Holocaust that seem to come out of nowhere in a completely absurd manner, with striking juxtaposition to the Mizrahi parents' experience of suffering and to the appearance of Arabic. And in both, I regret to say, there is enormous confusion, not to say almost total erosion, of identity and identification, of questions such as who is who, who mentions whom, who embodies whom, who says what and in which language. Whether it is my narrator in "St. John the Divine," who, for her father, embodies and represents his sister in Egypt, and whose photograph is presented as a photograph of the sister; or whether it is Castel-Bloom's protagonist, who collapses into the absurd dialogue that asks whether her mother is her mother and who her mother is, and consequently, who is her mother's daughter anyway?

If this list is not sufficient to elucidate the "biographical, social, and political climate" I mentioned earlier, from which these two stories might have hatched, then the primary and most shocking image, that of the snakebite, recurs in different variations in both stories. In "Ummi Fi Shughl," the mother, who crouches under the bench, is liable to bite the narrator, while in "St. John the Divine," one sentence is repeated over and over again like a terrifying mantra, uttered in Arabic by the narrator's grandmother about her son who abandoned her: "Tu'ban kan yinzil min batni ahsan minno" (A snake, if it came out of my belly, would be better than him — than the father).

What, then, is this harsh image of the snakebite in the context of Mizrahi identity and the narrator's self-constitution, or, in fact, the lack of self-constitution vis-à-vis the Mizrahi parents and the Arabic they speak? Why, if I might put it this way, would the parents' Mizrahi identity, as these stories would have it, bite the Hebrew self, the narrating Hebrew voice?

There is not and cannot be an unequivocal answer, partly because both stories are unwilling or unable to fully—or even partially—open up this metaphor. Their entire existence is embedded in a vague liminal space, in which fragments of discourse and pieces of dreams and oblique dialogues with a certain emotional and political reality coalesce into an essence that resists definition. There is no answer, then, but there is a platform in both stories. There is an extremely

thick platform that comprises layer upon layer of guilt; a desire for atonement and forgiveness that even takes on religious dimensions; fear of revenge and persecution by the Mizrahi parents and their abandoned culture under the bench. The fear of being bitten emerges from this platform, as does the abandoned Arabic language, which comes back to insistently remind us of its existence and demand its due.

The attendant guilt and resentment, in both cases, have not only a last name but a first name. I believe that the first name of the guilt in both cases is the guilt of writing, of writing in Hebrew. Writing in Hebrew marks, above all, the transformation into Israeliness: the huge distance, virtually unbridgeable, between the immigrant Mizrahi parent, whose language and culture were debased by the masters of the country, and their children, who walk comfortably amid the language of the country and its masters. It is precisely for this reason, precisely because Arabic emerges in these stories from such a lush bed of guilt and anxiety, felt by both the abandoned and the abandoners, that it appears as living material, trembling and fomenting, and not as dead material, not as a quotation in a realistic story that mimics a character who mimics Arabic speech. The snake, we must remember, whatever its significance, is not a dead snake or a plastic toy. It is a living snake.

“Ya sater ya rab” — God help us — calls the mother of the narrator in “Ummi Fi Shughl” after her daughter rejects her and refuses to let her into her home. “Ya sater ya rab.” How well I know that idiom. My grandmother and my mother used it whenever they encountered something very frightening, unreasonable, horrifying, something or someone that resembled a monster. So here is the other thing I want to say: the two narrators are depicted somewhat monstrously in the stories they concoct. At least in their own eyes they have a monstrous image, and that appellation, *monster*, illuminates the words of Nurit Zarchi that I mentioned earlier, regarding whom bad things happen to in fiction. In their traumatic and tortured encounter with the abandoned Mizrahi parent, there is also their mistreatment of the parent. Cruelty. Coldheartedness. They do not fall into the arms of their “Mizrahi roots” but rather are gripped by them, and they put up a struggle that seems almost hopeless, a zero-sum struggle. Whether they fall into the Mizrahi parents’ arms or are abandoned, their selfhood remains shattered, injured, defeated.



It seems that what I am getting at is in fact the Mizrahi trauma. Not the one experienced by Mizrahi immigrants themselves, but by their children, which seeps into them in its circuitous and peculiar forms. They were the ones who chose to represent it in Hebrew, to articulate it in their Hebrew writing, and who had to invent their own private language for it.

Because that is what arises from the foundational experience of the girl-woman narrators in these two stories: the distinctive and dismantled syntax of the Mizrahi trauma as it is signified in the appearance of Arabic in a story written in Hebrew. This embodiment of the trauma is unrelated to and does not result from any of the familiar manifestations of the Mizrahi trauma: the humiliation of being sprayed with DDT, the marginalization of Mizrahi culture, or the shameful denying of Arabic culture and language. These do not appear in these stories overtly, and the covert references have been so utterly transformed, so ensnarled and swirled, that the original question is completely muddled in them and it is no longer clear what originates in what. What transforms what. These contents stem from delayed and flattening reworkings of the trauma. The protagonists of the stories implant themselves in the heart of the traumatic onslaught that

originates in childhood and that has little concern with content, inasmuch as it still cannot be put into words, or into the conventional words of the Mizrahi trauma in Israeli discourse. What there is, what is present, is the image — the terrifying and disturbing pictures of raw dream materials, the fluidity between what is reality and what is a hyperbole of internal and external reality.

I feel the need to write what is always important to say about literature, perhaps most important, and that is that these are very sad stories. Their terrible sadness arises, among other things, from the fact that they do not know that they are sad, because they cannot find a site for themselves, a legitimate plot of land where they might set down their sadness. Their sadness is so alien to itself, so clandestine, that it must wear a mask. These two stories wear masks so that they will not be recognized by the various powers of discourse — the intimate biographical one, as well as the social and political one — which seek to deprive them of the most important asset in their identity: the urge, the unstoppable and indefatigable drive, to undermine that identity and to constantly shift it from one place to another.

With the benefit of time, both internal and historical, I can see how the story I wrote in the early nineties, “St. John the Divine,” in which Arabic first appeared as a character demanding attention, laid the cornerstones — unprocessed, embryonic, still enveloped in bleeding cell tissue — for what would occur in my later writing. What was in “St. John the Divine” demanded an opening. The presence of Arabic demanded an opening, and it tried to occur in *The One Facing Us* and, years later, in *The Sound of Our Steps*. The Arabic that was the language of the image turned into the language of the characters, who became people. It turned into the natural language of those human beings. More importantly, it turned into the language of the author. Not in the sense that I began to write in Arabic, but rather in the way I came to see, over and over again, how the syntax and the cadence, as well as some of the vocabulary and concepts of my childhood Arabic, seeped into my Hebrew and changed it. The troubling image of the snake and the snakebite did not dissipate, it was not forgotten or caused to be forgotten, but it lost a lot of its bite. The status of that snake has become, I think, a little like the status of the house snake in Shimon Ballas’s autobiographical story “The Childhood of the Imagination,” to which the narrator’s mother intones what she believes is a magical line: “House snake, house snake, you shall not harm us and we shall not harm you.” A