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# THE HOLOCAUST: A MIZRAHI PERSPECTIVE\*

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Second Generation Mizrahi writers reject the Holocaust as an Israeli narrative (both national and Ashkenazi) that overshadows their own history and forces them to be integrated into a national story. They also reject the writing of first generation authors and their emotional identification with the Holocaust stories of European Jewry, claiming it must come at the expense of their unique Mizrahi perspective that will transcend the borders of the hegemonic representation. This dual rejection—of hegemonic Ashkenazi fiction and of first-generation Mizrahi writers—is evident in two alternative directions adopted by second generation Mizrahi writers.

One direction is political-critical. Writers such as Dudu Busi, Kobi Oz, and Orly Castel-Bloom examine both the temptation and the danger threatening Mizrahim who imagine they can become Israelis by adopting hegemonic (Ashkenazi) models of Israeliness, so losing their own ethnic consciousness within the hegemonic national Holocaust discourse.

The other direction is humanistic-ethnic. Writers such as Amira Hess and Sami Berdugo clarify that the political perspective of the Holocaust as solely an Israeli narrative or as a means of cultural control is inadequate, and demand that an additional, complementary viewpoint be considered. This complementary stance views the Holocaust as a necessary basis for understanding the experience of immigration and displacement of both European and Mizrahi Jews. This is an attempt to understand the Mizrahi migration, and particularly the trauma that accompanied it for over a generation, through the metaphor of the Holocaust.

In the introduction to *Playing in the Dark*, a series of lectures dealing mainly with white American literature and its explicit and implicit attitudes to blacks, Toni Morrison formulates a claim seemingly not germane to the subject and relating to her own work as a black writer:

My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.<sup>1</sup>

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\* This article was translated from Hebrew by Batya Stein.

<sup>1</sup> T. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. xi.

The obstacle lurking on this path is racism at both the linguistic and conceptual levels. To place blacks and whites at opposite poles and in a one-dimensional positive-negative spectrum may do justice to her role as a politically conscious freedom fighter, as a critique of the white American discourse and an exposure of its underlying oppression would warrant. This polarization, however, could prove harmful to her role as a writer. "Identity politics" and the clear-cut distinction between majority and minority, between rights possessors and rights-deprived, between blacks and whites, is incompatible with the literary representation of black and white identity. Hence the need to maneuver between seemingly obvious political opposites, the duty to renounce not only the history and the concrete circumstances of people's lives but the underlying ideological framework: the vilification of whites and the romanticization of blacks.

This article examines the attitude to Ashkenazim in Mizrahi literature, focusing on the attitude to the Holocaust and on the various attempts to contend with this Israeli (Ashkenazi) topic while stripping it of its conventional national meanings and offering alternative ones instead, typical of a marginal perspective. The article is part of a broader study that examines how Mizrahi writers cope with stereotypes about Ashkenazim and with the place of the imagined Ashkenazi when formulating the parameters of the Mizrahi self-image. The study also explores how Mizrahi writers seek release from the Ashkenazi presence to direct inwards, independently and non-polemically, the gaze that will purportedly constitute a Mizrahi self-consciousness. This way of coping, evident in the work of first and second generation writers, attempts to trace paths that depart from the hegemonic Holocaust discourse and to set up Mizrahi writing as a "minor literature," offering an alternative to the Israeli hegemonic corpus.

## 1. HOLOCAUST NOW

The ceremony performed in the "Kedma" school in the Tel Aviv Hatikva quarter on 1994 Holocaust Day created an uproar: beside the six million murdered by the Nazis, other genocides perpetrated in the course of history were also mentioned, such as the extermination of Native Americans, the murder of Armenians in Turkey, the killings in Ruanda. This expansion of the holocaust concept was presented as a universal lesson from the holocaust of the Jewish people: it is not a one and only event, since in similar circumstances of hatred, other peoples were also destroyed. For the first time, the lighting of a seventh candle (beside the six candles in memory of the six

million) extracted the memory of the Holocaust from the national space without reducing its meaning and dimensions. This unprecedented move evoked a significant political storm. The school principal, poet Sami Shalom-Chetrit, later reconstructed these events:

Educators and politicians have held that we, a school in a Mizrahi neighborhood, lack a legitimate right to deal with the question of the Holocaust, which they believe is a Jewish European issue. With a group of Betar members, Knesset member Limor Livnat staged a protest in front of the school and called upon the Minister of Education to close it. At the government meeting, late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin berated the Minister of Education and asked him to clarify the issue. They even attacked us for “daring” to play Hannah Senesh’s song in the version of “Habrera Hativeet” ... Things got so bad that an enraged lady screamed at me on the phone: “You Moroccans have already stolen everything from us, but that’s it! Do not dare to touch the Holocaust. You will not steal the Holocaust from us with your belly dancing.”<sup>2</sup>

This and other Chetrit statements do not convey the Mizrahi problematic vis-à-vis the Holocaust and vis-à-vis the official ceremonies sponsored by the Ministry of Education. The problem to which he directs attention is, first and foremost, Israeli—does the Holocaust have any meaning beyond the national dimension, beyond historical anti-Semitism? The innovative ceremony he proposes involves no attempt to appropriate or “steal” the Holocaust, not even to use it in an ethnical context. The Mizrahi trill does not replace the usual Hannah Senesh prayer song at these ceremonies and does not dare to suggest an alternative but rather the opposite: it confirms its status and allows Mizrahim to participate in the institutionalized practice. The extent to which this Mizrahi trill might be compatible with the hegemony may be learned from the enlistment of Amir Benayun to sing the Senesh song at the official Holocaust memorial ceremony in Jerusalem at Yad Vashem in 2007. Benayun is a Mizrahi singer who succeeded in attaining the recognition of the artistic establishment. His choice as the performing artist reflects the efforts of recent years “to impart” the legacy of the Holocaust to broad circles of the Israeli public that had felt alienated from it in the past. These examples require sharpening the question of whether Mizrahim appropriate the Holocaust for themselves and do whatever they wish with it, or whether the Holocaust serves the State of Israel as a means to bring them into the national discourse and preclude the option of their

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<sup>2</sup> S. Sh. Chetrit, “The Jewish Holocaust and the Universal Lesson.” Online: <http://www.kedma.co.il>.

Mizrahi perspective, one incompatible with the national—meaning Ashkenazi—perspective.

The desire of Mizrahim to be part of the Holocaust ceremonies and of the institution of its perpetuation is now clearer than ever. On the one hand, this is evident in the attempts to direct attention to the killings of Jews in Iraq (1940)<sup>3</sup> and the deportation of Jews to concentration camps from Greece, Tunis, and Libya and thereby question the accepted equation of the Holocaust solely with the fate of European Jews.<sup>4</sup> On the other, it is manifest in the attempt to describe Jewish history in Arab countries in terms borrowed from the historiography of European Jewry, showing it had also been marked by persecutions, pogroms, and religious and national hostility. The idea of establishing an institution called “Mizrahi Yad Vashem”<sup>5</sup> is one of its popular expressions.

## 2. HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN THE EYES OF FIRST GENERATION WRITERS

During the 1970s and 1980s, the attitude to the Holocaust underwent a fundamental change. Israelis began to display a growing interest in the history of the exile and in Jewish tradition, and a greater readiness to include

<sup>3</sup> “In the early 1940s Iraqi Jews suffered from riots that erupted under Rashid Ali’s pro-Nazi regime. They regarded these pogroms as manifestations of the Holocaust in Iraq and demanded to be part of the general story from the earliest stage.” See H. Yablonka, “Oriental Jewry and the Holocaust: A Tri-Generational Perspective,” *Israel Studies* 14.1 (2008): 96.

<sup>4</sup> The Holocaust curriculum in state track schools hardly considers the relatively limited share of Mizrahim in the Holocaust. The only treatment of the Holocaust in North Africa is the novella of N. Semel, *Flying Lessons* (Morris havivael melamed la’uf; trans. H. Halkin; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). In a style approaching fantasy (that is, the opposite of a documentary style), the book describes how Jews in the isle of Djerba were sent to their death. Jews in Tunis, Algeria, and Morocco wrote memoirs about the Holocaust, and some even received reparations as Holocaust survivors. A bill tabled in the Knesset on the payment of equal reparations for survivors from Libya and Tunis lacks sufficient backing for enactment.

<sup>5</sup> The organ of the Shas party, *Yom le-Yom*, published an editorial entitled, “A Must Today: Creating a ‘Yad Vashem on the Suffering of Jews in Arab Countries’” (June 2001). The idea is that a “Mizrahi Yad Vashem” would “collate all the stories of Moslems’ abuse of Jews in all Arab countries ... for the world to know and acknowledge our right to the Land of Israel, after we have been victims of harsh persecution everywhere,” p. 1. A recommendation to Israeli information offices also appears: “let them present not only the Holocaust and the Inquisition, the Crusades and Chmielnicki, but also our suffering at the hands of our Moslem cousins in all Arab countries,” p. 1. The political attitude underlying this project leaves no room for doubt: “It is important for the world to understand that the Moslem people also owes the Jewish people the State of Israel, and that they must find a solution for their Palestinian brethren, because they owe us after centuries of suffering and torture at their hand,” p. 1. Just as the attitudes of the national right tie the memory of the Holocaust to the demand for a larger State of Israel that would prevent Arabs from destroying it in the future, so is the experience of the persecution of Mizrahim in Arab countries associated with the demand for release from any obligation toward the Palestinians. Furthermore, Arab countries are supposed to absorb the Palestinians as a sign of their debt to the Jews who were forced to emigrate to Israel(!).

them in the perpetuated past of Israeli society.<sup>6</sup> The Holocaust continued to symbolize a national trauma, but after the trauma of the Yom Kippur war, an option emerged for identifying with Holocaust victims, weakening the tendency to view them as “sheep that went to the slaughter.”<sup>7</sup>

In the last decade, a tendency has become apparent to shed new light on “Holocaust Day” through “alternative” ceremonies that stress the personal relevance of the Holocaust to second and third generation members.<sup>8</sup> This had not been the case in Israel’s early years. Even before the institutionalization of “Holocaust Day” at the end of the 1950s, before Israel resolutely demanded—by the very conduct of Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem—the right to represent Holocaust victims, survivors had symbolized what Israel had essentially aspired to conceal: the exilic Jew and the exilic mentality, conveyed through the victims’ description as “sheep to the slaughter.” Before the institutionalization of the “Holocaust” there had been only refugees and survivors who had not been identified as part of the local society. Indeed, they had been forced to exist in its margins, since this was a society whose self-identity—particularly in its early years—had been based upon the negation of the survivors’ scorned image.

Writers of the 1948 generation (“*Dor Tashakh*”)—Yehudit Hendel, Moshe Shamir, Hanoch Bartov, and others—who described Holocaust survivors, may serve to illustrate this. They emphasized the survivors’ mental separateness and their marginality in Israel’s newly rebuilt society. They offered the figure of the “sabra” as an antithetical, even if imperfect, model. The commitment of these writers to Zionist values was behind their attitude to Holocaust survivors as “other people” (as the title of Hendel’s book). At the beginning, their short stories tended to cast doubt on the survivors’ ability to cut themselves off from past experiences and from the exilic mentality, and turn into sabras. The shift to broader epic writing during the

<sup>6</sup> Y. Zerubavel, “The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors” (in Hebrew), *Alpayim: A Multidisciplinary Publication for Contemporary Thought and Literature* 10 (1994): 42–67.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don Yehiya describe “civil religion” in Israel and the centrality of the Holocaust within it. See C. S. Liebman and E. Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1983). On the dominant status of the Holocaust in Israeli culture, see also A. Ophir, “On Sanctifying the Holocaust: An Anti-Theological Treatise,” *Tikkun* 2.1 (1987): 61–65, and T. Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (trans. H. Watzman; New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> In 1998, Sarah Blau conceived and created (together with Avi Gibson-Barel) the “alternative Holocaust ceremony,” an event that many found outrageous. At the ceremony, which takes place on the eve of Holocaust Day at a Tel Aviv nightclub, artists, actors, and media people speak about their personal attitude to the Holocaust. In the course of time, the ceremony became a fashionable intellectual Tel Aviv event, and 600 people attended in 2003.

1950s<sup>9</sup> was accompanied by an emphasis on the possibility of the survivors' integration in the new Israeli space, but still required them to go through the "melting pot" on their way to Israeliness.<sup>10</sup> From the early 1960s and as the Zionist perspective began to wear away, however, the negative cultural attitude toward the survivors changed too. Writers such as Aharon Appelfeld and poets such as Yehuda Amichai, Dan Pagis, Yaakov Besser, and Itamar Yazo-Kest created a humanistic perspective that coped with the survivors' experience without ideological national commitments.

Early Mizrahi writers were closely acquainted with the immigrants' situation and had themselves experienced life on the sidelines of Israeli society since they too had been approached as rejected and Other. They could easily identify with the survivors and see them as partners in their social and cultural marginality. Indeed, within the polarity of Israeliness and exile, between the sabra and the Holocaust survivor, Mizrahi writers found themselves in a mid-position—neither part of the heroic stories of the War of Independence nor of the unprecedented suffering of concentration camps. And yet, the personal contact with the Holocaust survivors they met in the transit camp, in the army, and in the youth training kibbutzim enabled them to brand survivors as a separate strain within Israeliness, incompatible with the polarized conceptual ethnic framework imposed on them. Sami Michael provided many examples in his first novel *All Men Are Equal but Some Are More*: "This was a no-race type; neither Sephardi nor Ashkenazi. In the classification system I had adopted in the transit camp, there was no place for them. The abysmal suffering they had known had purified their souls."<sup>11</sup> This was also the basis for the critical understanding of the contrast between the generalizing ethnic stereotype of Ashkenazim and the concrete human beings they are meant to represent:

"Look, here we all say 'vus-vus'—and it's meant as an insult, even a hateful one. But I'm stuck with forty of them in one shack. Ten of them were born here and, come four o'clock, they doll themselves up, get on the bus and leave—to the comfort of North Tel Aviv or somewhere. But the others—they're in no hurry. They're also 'vus-vusim,' but they turn around on their beds in the big hut, smoke, fix their eyes on the ceiling ... they have nowhere to go. Their families were slaughtered. Before you came, I was like one of

<sup>9</sup> H. Bartov, *Every One Had Six Wings* (Shesh knafayim le-ehad; trans. Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature; Jerusalem: WZO, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> D. Laor, "Between Reality and Vision: Mass Immigration in the Israeli Novel" (in Hebrew), in *Immigrants and Transit Camps 1948–1952* (ed. M. Naor; Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1986), pp. 205–220.

<sup>11</sup> S. Michael, *All Men Are Equal but Some Are More* (Shavim ve-shavim yoter; Tel Aviv: Bustan, 1976), p. 146.

them—but I still hoped that one day I would meet up with the family. They lie there, dreaming dead dreams. When they heard you had come—all of them volunteered to help. Even the cook. I don't know if you'll understand, *ya-aba* ... When these people shoved something into my bag, before I came to the transit camp, they set aside a slice of bread for their dead dreams.”<sup>12</sup>

The critiques of this novel targeted the ethnic discrimination that the writer objects to and missed its deep ambivalence, which rescued it from becoming a one-sided protest. The ambivalence is manifest, for instance, in the narrator's attitude toward the country and its institutions. His total alienation is hard to ignore, and his quasi-forced participation in the Six-Day War evokes his inner resistance. Nevertheless, the novel presents the events as a process of drawing closer, adapting, and finally even understanding, on the assumption that the military experience is an unequivocal way of gaining acceptance in Israeli society. At the end, the protagonist is even commended for his action in war, and happily declares that he has thereby merited, for the first time, “a document stating and attesting to my being an Israeli citizen.”<sup>13</sup>

A similar ambivalence characterizes the protagonist's attitude to Ashkenazim. The rejection he senses from Tel Aviv society, and particularly the prejudices of his Ashkenazi mother-in-law that end up destroying his marriage, confirm the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi distinction. This ethnic division, however, collapses altogether when it touches on Holocaust survivors, who rise above ethnic classifications and present an essential Ashkenazi core that is not antithetical to the Mizrahi one.<sup>14</sup> In this context of unstable divisions, the novel also notes the existence of corrupt Mizrahim, “vile like Abu Halawa” the pimp,<sup>15</sup> and also describes very human Ashkenazim. The ethnic perspective, which reproduces the ethnic separation created in the hegemonic discourse, is in a constant and unresolved confrontation with the humanistic viewpoint. The narrator, intent on representing the suppressed ethnic story, also discovers the grave flaws of this perspective and the desire

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<sup>12</sup> S. Michael, *All Men Are Equal*, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> S. Michael, *All Men Are Equal*, p. 254.

<sup>14</sup> Despite the seemingly stable division between survivors and native born, the novel is prepared to transcend it, obviously without renouncing it completely. Ruhama lives in a kibbutz and invites the narrator to visit her there, and he likes her because “she is not Ashkenazi and not Sephardi either” (S. Michael, *All Men Are Equal*, p. 116). This pattern of transcending ethnic conflicts may appear without connection to the Holocaust.

<sup>15</sup> S. Michael, *All Men Are Equal*, p. 116.



to question it, at least where it blindly follows stereotypical representations.<sup>16</sup>

In this context, both Michael and Amir reiterate that “there were tragedies worse than ours.”<sup>17</sup> Admiringly, without any sabra haughtiness, Michael views the Holocaust as a matrix for the relationship that had prevailed not only between Jews and Christians in Europe but also between Jews and Moslems in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, his native country. The comparison between the *farhoud* (the Baghdad pogrom in the spring of 1941) and the Holocaust usually appears in order to point out the Jews’ shared fate in different places. Writers of Iraqi origin, therefore, note the impact of Nazi propaganda in Iraq in the early 1940s,<sup>18</sup> the frenzied masses screaming: “Death to the Jews! Destroy the germs! Long live Hitler!”<sup>19</sup> and the fear of a fate similar to that suffered by European Jews.<sup>20</sup> The description of the arms collected from the Baghdad Zionist underground with the proclamation of Israel’s independence also indicates that community members had been aware of the need for self-defense “after Hitler.”<sup>21</sup> Eli Amir’s memoirs note a similar certainty concerning a shared Jewish fate in Europe and in the Middle East:

I had already heard whispers about what had happened “there” in the synagogue in Baghdad. Always whispers. I felt dim memories of the “*farhoud*” rising in me again, the riots in Baghdad, the flight over the rooftops, the dagger sticking in our neighbor Tafakha’s breast, and the conversation with my father:

“Father! Is it like the *farhoud*?”

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<sup>16</sup> In a later interview, Michael broadens the humanistic criterion that serves him in the representation of Holocaust survivors and contrasts them with Ashkenazi sabras: “I went out with young people my age and spoke English with them, and suddenly I could talk about Pushkin and Becket and Shakespeare ... I saw that those who had been born and lived in Israel had been reared for war, raised to build agriculture, and they had the strength of spirit, the courage, and the muscles to meet these tasks. Culturally, however, I felt above them. At that time in Israel, people who sat for matriculation exams were viewed as traitors, and those who sought to acquire an education or who dreamt of an academic career were considered deserters. To me they appeared as a bunch of stevedores or port workers. The coarse sabra evoked no admiration in me, and resembled one of Baghdad’s stevedores and hooligans” (S. Michael, *Unbounded Ideas* [Gevulot ha-ruah; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2000], p. 19). Cultural partnership between immigrants from Iraq, particularly the intellectuals among them, and European Holocaust survivors—Michael did not have this with the sabras, uncultured and uninterested in culture, a kind of Israeli version of “white trash.” Michael questions here the accepted Zionist division that associates Mizrahi Jews with lack of culture and with backwardness.

<sup>17</sup> E. Amir, *Scapegoat* (Tarnegol kaparot; trans. D. Bilu; London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987), p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> S. Fatael, *In Bagdad’s Alleys* (Be-simta’ot Bagdad; Jerusalem: Carmel, 2004), p. 94.

<sup>19</sup> S. Michael, *Storm among the Palms* (Sufah ben ha-Dekalim; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> S. Michael, *Storm among the Palms*, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> S. Michael, *A Handful of Fog* (Hofen shel arafel; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1979), p. 119.

“Yes, no. Leave it alone, you’re too young, my son!” My father pressed his lips together and stuck his chin out in front of him.

Later came the prayers in the synagogue, the penitential *slithoth*, the fast, but the trains went on taking them to their death...

“Why? Why?” I screamed at my father.

“Because we are Jews, my son! The Christians over there, the Moslems here.”<sup>22</sup>

Several revisionist historians have claimed that the formulation of the *farhoud* memory in terms resorting explicitly to the Holocaust story was driven by a desire to be included in the Israeli national narrative and to participate in its collective symbols so as to create a joint foundation of supra-ethnic memory.<sup>23</sup> In joining the Holocaust narrative (in its Zionist version!), however, these writers did not altogether repress the non-Zionist versions of Arab-Jewish relationships; rather, this version prevailed beside them. Although critics failed to notice this, Mizrahi writers remained ambivalent about joining the Holocaust narrative, as I have noted elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> In this paper, my concern is not the historiography of Iraqi Jewry as expressed in the literature, but the need of second-generation writers to connect to the story of Holocaust survivors living in Israel. This need has become more prominent in recent years and emerges together with a declining concern of first-generation Mizrahi writers with the story of Mizrahi suffering they had tackled in their early works, and together with their involvement with the Holocaust and the subject of Mizrahi marginality in their later writing.

<sup>22</sup> E. Amir, *Scapegoat*, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Y. Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 140–141. The works of H. Hakak, “For As Long as They Are Within Me” (Kol od nafsham bi), in *Forgotten Testimony* (Te’udah Nishkahat; Jerusalem: Shalhevet Press, 1987), pp. 83–96, and B. Hakak, “Mass Grave 1941” (Kever ahim 1941), in *Then, at the End of the Genealogy* (Ve-az be-kets ha-yohasin; Jerusalem: Shalhevet Press, 1987), pp. 49–96, which locate the *farhoud* events in a tradition of Jewish writing about the pogrom, strongly convey this will to belong. Nancy Berg accordingly claims that the choice to write about the *farhoud* is a Mizrahi reaction to the substantial Holocaust corpus in Hebrew literature. Without lessening the enormity of the Holocaust in Europe, this writing emphasizes that Jewish suffering in exile is not limited only to Ashkenazim. See N. E. Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> Y. Oppenheimer, *Barriers: The Representation of the Arab in Hebrew and Israeli Fiction, 1906–2005* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008), pp. 290–294.

### 3. THE HOLOCAUST IN THE LATER WORKS OF FIRST-GENERATION WRITERS

The Mizrahim who appear in Sami Michael's *Water Kissing Water* and in Eli Amir's *Jasmine*<sup>25</sup> have integrated successfully into Israeli society. In economic terms, they are members of the middle-class, civil servants who identify with the state's symbols and lack a developed ethnic consciousness. The novels that these writers have published on the subject of the Holocaust, however, have no Mizrahi characters of Iraqi extraction as is customary in their other books. In *Saul's Love*, Amir presents a Sephardi young man who traces his family's ancestry in Jerusalem seven generations back.<sup>26</sup> In his attitude to the new Mizrahi immigration, he also conveys the native's fears that immigrants benefit from "affirmative action" (for instance, in the award of university scholarships), and claims this is incompatible with the critical Mizrahi stance objecting to the discrimination of Mizrahi immigrants in Israel. Amir chooses a Sephardi young man with a heroic military record and with the education and professional qualifications that make him a rich man, who has moved to the United States because of his work. His father, who had been an active member of the pre-State Etzel underground, remained a fervent supporter of Menachem Begin. This choice points to disinterest in the pain of Mizrahi immigration and its memory. The only significant setback in the novel is the opposition of his girlfriend's father to her marriage to a Sephardi. Shaul does not recover from this rejection and never starts a family of his own. The narrator, however, takes pains to minimize Shaul's ethnic consciousness by pointing out his empathy with the suffering of the Ashkenazi family of Holocaust survivors, and by emphasizing its parallels with the Sephardi family (in the character of inter-generational relationships, in their touchiness regarding disrespect, and so forth).

If anything hinders the possibility of a marriage between an Ashkenazi woman and a Sephardi man, it is the nightmarish world of the old generation of Holocaust survivors and not the young generation of his girlfriend. She is not at all bothered by his Sephardi origin and is even far more attracted to it than to what appears to her as Ashkenazi coldness, illustrating the positive meaning of stereotypes. Indeed, these objections are certainly untypical of Israeli society as a whole. The novel offers various Ashkenazi ("Polish") figures who have no negative prejudices about Sephardim. The description

<sup>25</sup> S. Michael, *Water Kissing Water* (Mayim noshkim le-Mayim; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2001); E. Amir, *Jasmine* (Yasmin; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> E. Amir, *Saul's Love* (Ahavat Shaul; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1998).

of Menachem Begin's speech at Shaul's bar-mitzvah, which becomes the emotional peak of the novel, is meant to attest to the Ashkenazi noble spirit that knows how to show Sephardim respect and values their Jewish legacy. Evident here is the vast effort that the writer, a Labor man, invested in distancing the ethnic experience and neutralizing its intensity, although it does occasionally burst through all the denial mechanisms he used to contain it.<sup>27</sup>

Sami Michael's recent excursions into the experiences of Holocaust survivors do not feature Mizrahi characters either. In many interviews, Michael confessed himself uninterested in what Mizrahi intellectuals call Jewish-Arab identity, and even suspicious of over-political perceptions of ethnical identity, particularly since the publication of *Victoria*,<sup>28</sup> which described Baghdad's poor, uneducated Jews.<sup>29</sup> In *Pigeons at Trafalgar Square*,<sup>30</sup> which describes the vicious circle of Jewish-Palestinian violence, he tries to present the core experiences of the two peoples by choosing accepted and official national symbols. He therefore contrasts the Nakba with the Holocaust—ostensibly the most representative Israeli experience. For the first time, Michael turns from a concern with the familiar experience of Mizrahim (including Mizrahim who “succeeded” in becoming Israelis) to the national center.<sup>31</sup> The question that concerns him is what could bridge the distance between the two peoples, and the answer is—awareness of their mutual suffering. Obviously, this question had already surfaced in early Mizrahi writing, and the answer was that Mizrahim in Israel could serve as a bridge because of the Arab culture that is also theirs.<sup>32</sup> *Pigeons at Trafalgar Square* offers a fundamentally different bridging, in which Mizrahim have no part: acknowledging the radical suffering created by each of the national

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<sup>27</sup> Feelings of suffering discrimination are ascribed mainly to the novel's minor characters: Shaul's father expresses them toward the “Mapainikim” he perceives as holding the keys to political and economic power (E. Amir, *Saul's Love*, p. 182). He also projects these feelings on the failure of Shaul's relationship with his girlfriend Haya, relating it to his being a “Sephardi” (p. 183). The army context provides the backdrop for further complaints of discrimination. Although the army spy unit where Arab-speaking Mizrahim serve is considered a special elite unit, sayings about “screwing the blacks” (p. 26) are occasionally heard. Avshi pins his fears of a delayed promotion on his Mizrahi origin (p. 83). His friend Yehiel strengthens Avshi's fears when noting that they will never give command of the unit to a “black.”

<sup>28</sup> S. Michael, *Victoria* (Viktoria; trans. D. Bilu; London: Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> S. Michael, *Unbounded Ideas*, pp. 20–31.

<sup>30</sup> S. Michael, *Pigeons at Trafalgar Square* (Yonim be-Trafalgar; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Only one character insults Arabs out of sheer hatred—the poultry dealer Abu Haswa, an Iraqi Jew who employs an Arab in the South Tel Aviv market. Michael's choice to incriminate the only Mizrahi Jew in the novel (who appears only for this purpose) exposes not only weariness with the ethnic discourse, but also the adoption of an element of the Orientalist discourse that relates to Mizrahim as Arab haters, contrary to the other Western characters, who are unaffected by nationalism.

<sup>32</sup> Sh. Ballas, *The Transit Camp* (Ha-ma'abarah; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1964); S. Michael, *Refuge* (Hasut; trans. E. Grossman; Philadelphia: JPS, 1988).

memories. Israelis must go back and understand what the Nakba of 1948 means to the Palestinians, as Palestinians are supposed to understand the meaning of the Jewish Holocaust. In the name of Holocaust suffering, however, Michael takes leave from the ethnic suffering that, by comparison, seems limited.

In their attitude to the Holocaust, then, Michael and Amir reversed their approach. At first, Holocaust survivors had represented the human margins of Israeliness and had therefore been an object of empathy and identification for writers who had themselves felt uprooted from their homeland and also rejected by the absorbing society. Characters of Holocaust survivors, however, still appeared only in the background of the story about the suffering of Mizrahi immigrants to Israel. By contrast, in these authors' later writing and from a more distant perspective, Holocaust survivors came to represent the possibility of reframing catastrophe. Rather than the basis of a victimization consciousness and a passive life, the Holocaust became the starting point of a new life and a powerful impetus for amending reality, one that refuses to be worn down and engulfed by the landscape of native Israeli culture. Instead, the survivors choose a far more resolute and committed stance of moral responsibility.

This is not the belligerent legacy of the Holocaust and the psychology of "identification-with-the-aggressor"<sup>33</sup> that many texts in Israeli literature, particularly since the First Lebanon War, rejected when describing the oppression of Arabs as a manifestation of a post-traumatic or post-Holocaust phenomenon.<sup>34</sup> Michael and Amir speak of an opposite Holocaust legacy, one that could serve as a bridge bringing the two peoples closer. The rehabilitation they propose here concerning the Holocaust and its human, and even political, legacy compelled first-generation writers to renounce the Mizrahi perspective. They still deal with the margins of Israeli society, but not the ethnic margins. Amir describes a girl who, after converting to Christianity, chose to live in a monastery on Mount Tabor and devote herself to providing humanitarian help to Arab villages in the Galilee. Michael describes an Israeli who discovered he had been born to an Arab family, abandoned in the escape from Haifa, and adopted by a mother who was a Holocaust survivor.

Paradoxically, the choice of Holocaust survivors represented these writers' need to break away from the constraining image of "ethnic" writers.

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<sup>33</sup> Y. Feldman, "'Identification-with-the-Aggressor' or the 'Victim Complex'? Holocaust and Ideology in Israeli Theater—'Ghetto' by Joshua Sobol," *Modern Judaism* 9 (1989): 165–178.

<sup>34</sup> Hanoch Levin's plays—"The Patriot," Joshua Sobol—"Ghetto," and others.

This was an act of repression and sublimation of the Mizrahi immigration trauma. They continued to deal with calamity, but only that of others. Michael wrote rather schematically about the Holocaust experience,<sup>35</sup> contrary to Amir, who knew how to get under the skin of his characters in a more subtle, detailed, and unique fashion. And yet, the participation of these writers<sup>36</sup> in the long-standing discussion on the memory of the Holocaust taking place in Israeli literature and culture marked a dual achievement for them. On the one hand, it presented their humanistic perspective, which resisted the political use of the Holocaust and demanded that it be viewed as a legacy that had been excluded and marginalized by the Israeli hegemony. Those who experienced the Holocaust must, in their view, adopt a stance of peace and reconciliation, which is incompatible with accepted Israeli views. On the other, the appropriation of the Holocaust was supposed to turn into a litmus test of their writing as Israelis—if these writers can convey the experience and the world of the survivors (and even pepper their monologues with Yiddish expressions), the ethnicity label attached to their writing is no longer valid.

#### 4. THE SECOND GENERATION AND THE HOLOCAUST

“Mimicry,” as formulated by Homi Bhabha, could be a fruitful theoretical framework for the literary representation of the Holocaust by second-generation writers. Within the conflictual relationship between hegemonic discourse and the counterpressure of history (ethnic or national difference)—mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other as a “subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.” Mimicry emerges as the representation of difference and as a sign of recalcitrance that

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<sup>35</sup> The only information provided about the Holocaust survivor is contingent on the ideological—national, not ethnic—stance of the author: because of her beauty, she was not murdered but was sexually exploited by Nazi officers, and was later unable to have normal relationships with men or to have children. She was, however, definitely capable of continuing her life as a devoted mother who educated her adopted son “without tormented memories, without revenge yearnings, without feelings of bitterness or remorse toward anyone. Indeed, as far as this is possible, Zeev was free from the fetters of personal history” (S. Michael, *Pigeons in Trafalgar Square*, p. 28).

<sup>36</sup> Even Shimon Ballas, minimally and indirectly, joined this move. In the novel *Outsiders* (Yaldei hutz; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), which concludes the *Tel Aviv East* (Tel Aviv Mizrah) trilogy he had begun with *The Transit Camp* (Ha-ma’abarah), the protagonist Yosef Shabi deals with the publication of his friend’s memoirs and their translation from Arabic into Hebrew. He nevertheless joins his Ashkenazi wife on a trip to Poland in search for her roots. This soothing novel presents the difficulty of preserving the Mizrahi perspective of separateness: the ethnic mixed marriage and the new Israeli culture with Mizrahi and Ashkenazi participants—particularly in the second generation, for some of whom ethnic identity remains undefined—create for the first time a “melting pot” that turns all of them, in various ways, into “outsiders.”

coheres the dominant strategic function of hegemonic power, posing an immanent threat to both “normalized” knowledge and to disciplinary powers. It reveals that authoritative discourse depends on strategic limitations or prohibitions, and thus problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority.<sup>37</sup>

Second-generation writers are definitely aware of the Holocaust’s centrality in the shaping of Israeli identity, and of its effect on the replacement of the first generation’s ethnic discourse with a national discourse. Seeking to gain release from hegemonic Israeli identity, these young writers attempt to offer a literary alternative. Faced with the impossibility of disregarding the ethnic discourse, however, they choose its parodic-grotesque representation (mimicry). The breakdown of this discourse marks an important stage of separation between renewed Mizrahi ethnicity and Israeli nationalism. One example out of many is Dudu Busi’s description of a father’s madness from his son’s adolescent perspective:

For two and a half years, the guy was stuck on the Holocaust, as if he’d been a scion of oppressed European Jewry and not of a family of gamblers paddling in the Tigris in the daytime and conning Moslems playing dice at night. In a realistic style, without using photographs or slides, just from his head, in acrylic on canvas, he painted naked victims in gas chambers, Jewish prisoners in forced labor, hands sticking out of train cars and mountains of human skeletons. All these horrors fill the “wall of tears,” the name he gave to one of the high walls in the big study in the yard. At that time, this Yom-Tov Yitzhaki was more than convinced that in his previous incarnation his name had been Yom-Tov Yitzhakovsky—a Warsaw tailor murdered by the Nazis. When confessing this to me, he claimed he just dreams about the Holocaust all the time. In his dreams, his double from the previous incarnation appeared to him, one in a dynasty of tailors who had handed down their craft through the generations. A bit screwed up this Yom-Tov, no question. I think he’d been too affected by the TV broadcasts on Holocaust Day as a kid.... At the time he was working on his Holocaust paintings, he took up a murderous diet, to feel the horrible hunger that Yom-Tov Yitzhakovsky had felt in the Warsaw ghetto. His daily menu was two pieces of fruit and two slices of bread with margarine. The guy lost fifteen kilos, no joke. At the start of his working day, he lit six memorial candles in remembrance of the six million, and then he worked long hours, while his portable stereophonic tape blared out sad Yiddish tunes. Sometimes, while working, he’d burst out crying about the bitter fate of his virtual family, all of whom had perished.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See H. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 85–92.

<sup>38</sup> D. Busi, *A Noble Savage* (Pere atsil; Jerusalem: Keter, 2003), pp. 42–43.

Kobi Oz also describes the Mizrahi adoption of virtual memories of the Holocaust as madness. This time, they have no artistic dimension at all—they are the hallucinations of Maurice Batito, an old man who cleans the neighborhood synagogue:

Going a bit crazy. Everything that once was is changing for me. I remember strange tastes. I remember sounds of boots, deliberately pounding the street, to frighten. Many boots, marching in step to the house where I lived. Suddenly my dad gets a tic in his eye. He is scared. My dad, the hero, is shaking. Mom packs quickly. We go down the back steps and quickly run away from the pounding boots.<sup>39</sup>

I had a strange dream. And in the dream I was a boy with lice.... All were marching in earnest and all were thin. And my head itched and my body itched. And I saw a tap and drank cold water. I was frozen and I wanted to die. I ran to our barrack ... and then I woke up with a word that haunts me, Buchenwald. From that night on, I was transformed into an Ashkenazi, my life was "Ashkenazised" altogether. I began to remember strange memories not my own.<sup>40</sup>

In the end, a tattooed number appears on his arm, and a survivor beggar woman forces him to believe that he is no other but her husband, murdered in a concentration camp. These grotesque plots of reversed identities and involuntary adoption of imagined Holocaust memories point to the power of Israeli culture (Holocaust Day ceremonies and the familiar narratives of survivors' testimonies) to create and recycle fictional identities, which come at the expense of the ability to create the genuine Mizrahi identity, away and separate from these engulfing influences.<sup>41</sup>

Even novels about young Mizrahi men who leave Israel to seek their luck in Germany clarify that Israeliness cannot be relinquished, and reawakens even more strongly in the consciousness of these emigrants. This is not universal sensitivity to suffering, but typical Israeli anxiety and the need to take revenge on the Germans, and especially the neo-Nazis. Yossi Avni tells the story of a survivor who returned to live in Germany, and he teaches his

<sup>39</sup> K. Oz, *Petty Hoodlum* (Avarian tsa'atsu'a; Tel Aviv: Keshet, 2002), p. 132.

<sup>40</sup> K. Oz, *Petty Hoodlum*, pp. 136–137.

<sup>41</sup> Orly Castel-Bloom phrased this ironically: "'I'm not a Holocaust survivor,' I replied, 'but lately I've been dreaming that I am. As a matter of fact, my parents are from Cairo.'" (O. Castel-Bloom, "Umami fi shurl" [trans. D. Bilu], in *Ribcage: Israeli Women's Fiction* (ed. C. Diamant and L. Rattok; New York: Hadassah, 1994), p. 260). Zvia Ben-Yoseph Ginor claims that the speaker in this story adopts the neurosis of the Ashkenazi majority culture, when her hidden wish is to change her self-identity. The irony here targets this culture, which demands the erasure of ethnic separateness while it hallows Holocaust victims. See Z. B.-Y. Ginor, "Involuntary Myths: Mania, Mother, and Zion in Orly Castel-Bloom's 'Umami fi shurl,'" *Prooftexts* 25 (2005): 247.



Israeli protagonist to suspect elderly Germans and provoke them at every opportunity.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, in *Mother Is Longing for Words*, Dudu Busi describes his Israeli protagonist drawing provocative stars of David on a shoe shop he rents in Berlin and insistently speaking of a desire to take revenge on the Germans as a Jew, avenge the honor of Holocaust victims, and

prove to all the bragging Israelis that they're just softies. Burning to prove to them that the revenge on the Germans they never took, I, Ovadiah Yehezkel, former ardent Zionist and fighting Jew they've called a lout, is going to do it big way.<sup>43</sup>

The novel is loaded with fiery nationalist declarations that only concretize, in parodic terms, the internalization of the Israeli Holocaust discourse and the impossibility to be free from it, even for one determined to leave the country due to the ethnic discrimination to which he woke up one day. Ovadia's loutish Mizrahi quality comes forth as a parody, in his ability to fully realize the Israeli dream of revenge and thereby prove his advantage over Ashkenazim, that is, to define himself through structured stereotypes—the Mizrahi lout, the “suckers” who went “like sheep to slaughter,”<sup>44</sup> and the fearless Israeli fighter.

Some mimic writing, however, exists outside the parodic representation: it is done from a distance and is not engulfed within the national discourse and, therefore, does not need to separate from it by using exaggeration. Sami Berdugo, who tried to offer a Mizrahi experience that is not bound by the Israeli one—and hence not at risk of engulfment within it—was interested in the experience of Holocaust survivors while aware of the distance between this experience and its institutionalization in Israel's memorial culture. In the novel *And Say to the Wind*, his narrator watches Holocaust movies but understands them only partly. This allows her to offer her sensitivity and her own mode of speaking, oblivious to all those around her reciting and recycling the familiar narratives:

These people's tears do not move me, because of the thin voice they let out, which blends with slashing words in a foreign language, as if they'd never left their place. I look mainly at the old women, who speak slowly and lift up old pictures right to the center of the television, which enlarges people photographed in black and white wearing pressed suits and round glasses. I don't

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<sup>42</sup> Y. Avni, *Auntie Farhuma Wasn't a Whore After All* (Doda Farhuma lo hayitah zonah; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> D. Busi, *Mother is Longing for Words* (Ima mitga'aga'at le-milim; Jerusalem: Keter, 2006), p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> D. Busi, *Mother is Longing*, p. 83.

pay attention to the pictures, only to the hands of the old ladies and to the red nail polish in all the knolled fingers covered with blue veins.... The women's voices spread through the living room like a big loudspeaker. There's also the sound of an accordion in the background, and moments of silence when there's nothing to say, and the only thing that moves is the silence and the body's tremor.<sup>45</sup>

Only the physical metonyms that appear on the screen remain of the televised Holocaust narrative—the look of hands, voices, movements, silences, tremors—and their role is to protect the spectator from too much identification, as from the identification of the story with a familiar narrative. From such a distant stance, it is easy to look at the Holocaust without understanding it, that is, to allow it to spread and not accumulate. This is Berdugo's first attempt to touch the subject without grotesque representation.

By contrast, the Holocaust plays a more central role in his later novella, *Orphans*. The narrator is married to the daughter of survivors and describes the effect of the Holocaust on her education and on her parents' attitude to her and to her children. The story does not focus on the Holocaust but uses it as background to understand the immigration and refugee experience, the loss of the homeland, and the truncation of the time continuity. The narrator discovers a similarity between displaced people from Europe and from North Africa. Rather than serving to obscure the uniqueness and centrality of Mizrahi consciousness, this similarity helps to clarify a shared experience marked by immigration and displacement instead of nativeness and rootedness:

It's hard for me to think how you can live like them, all the time afraid of a chance event that will come up in one moment and turn things around everywhere in the world. Their neighborhood and their home are dear to them. And so too is the land they chose to reach to be in a country that is now taking shape.... The broad land almost breaks apart in front of their eyes and cannot hold. They hope it will stay put at least until they reach the end, silently asking that nothing should take them out of their borders. At their age one can understand this thought, after they'd spent young childhood years in a strange and cold country that had been a wonderful dream and then a nightmare, leaving everything and coming here without knowing how it would be with them. Rahel was a baby of hopes for them, led them to forget the European horrors and concentrate on her and on her education and on the small apart-

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<sup>45</sup> S. Berdugo, *And Say to the Wind* (Kakha ani medaberet im ha-ruah; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2002), pp. 142–143.

ment they had bought. Now they want to go back to the old days, to conform to what is comfortable.<sup>46</sup>

Abstention from clichés concerning the post-traumatic experience of the Holocaust allows the focus to shift to its main features. Erosion of the sense of time continuity and of its possible correction (so that the present also evokes anxiety about its collapse at any moment) may encourage attempts to reinforce spatial and family borders (so that the attachment to the local territory rests on a personal rather than an ideological, Zionist, basis). This fragility of the sense of time and space clarifies in exact terms the trauma in the survivors' daily life; indirectly, it also clarifies the Mizrahi immigration experience, which exposes a similar severance and a loss of time and space continuity,<sup>47</sup> obviously without one excluding the other. The story views immigration as an ethnic experience, North-African, unique, but also points to the possibility of viewing it as a universal experience because it reminds us of entirely different forms and circumstances of immigration and marginality (such as that of Holocaust survivors). To include the Holocaust as a background, analogous (to a very limited extent) to the Mizrahi narrative, means focusing on its catastrophic dimension without blurring its uniqueness or dimming its intensity within a different hegemonic story, the Israeli one.

## 5. THE MIZRAHI HOLOCAUST

Sami Shalom Chetrit's "provocation" as principal of the Kedma school—lighting seven candles on Holocaust day claiming that not only should the Jewish Holocaust be remembered but also those of other oppressed peoples—is a subversive act. It undermines the national character of the Holocaust's representation in Israel and its perception as a one-time histori-

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<sup>46</sup> S. Berdugo, *And Say to the Wind*, pp. 141–142.

<sup>47</sup> Despite the narrator's explicit statement concerning the difference between the life of his wife's parents and his own, he is clearly revealing a similar fear, for instance, about the possibility that his wife should suddenly disappear (S. Berdugo, *And Say to the Wind*, p. 142), as she indeed does, or about unexpected changes: "My two children now explain to me that things move all the time, and there is no moment one can catch and believe will stay" (S. Berdugo, *And Say to the Wind*, p. 132). Like his wife's parents, who are Holocaust survivors, the Mizrahi narrator speaks about procreation in terms of male descendants, a dynasty, a chain, terms that define the human need for survival and do not reflect only Mizrahi ways of thinking. This consciousness of fragmentation and severance is typical of a universal cultural atmosphere that reaches sharp expression, for instance, in the millennium New Year celebrations: "There was a feeling that something unnatural was happening, a once in a lifetime reality was unfolding, as if the past had been erased and would no longer be examined. Only what was now counted, and a proud and young declaration would soon rise up to begin the history of a new present, such as we hadn't known" (S. Berdugo, *And Say to the Wind*, p. 153).

cal event, presenting it instead as one instance of the universal oppression of minorities. But the cancellation of the Ashkenazi monopoly on the Holocaust and its representation, accomplished here through the liberal rhetoric chosen by Chetrit, was a kind of cover for a far greater provocation: stamping the Mizrahi experience with the “Holocaust” seal and displacing attention from the national dimension—not to various other holocausts but to the Holocaust built into Israel’s social-ethnic life. Although recourse to universal terms is a “respectable” way of addressing the national discourse on the Holocaust, its use here was meant to confer legitimation on the ethnic challenge to it.

This universalistic rhetoric, however, is not found in works of fiction, which prefer to ascribe an ethnic Mizrahi dimension to the Holocaust and locate it within Israeli Mizrahi experience relating through this metaphor to “the victims of Holocaust survivors and their descendants.”<sup>48</sup> These works differ from those of second-generation Ashkenazi writers, who emphasize the personal, familial memory, and share in Israel’s hegemonic tendency to represent the Holocaust as a historical event that belongs in the past. The ethnic perspective thus emerges as a subversive response to the national, familial, and personal perspective typical of the Holocaust’s hegemonic representation in Israel.<sup>49</sup> A blunt example of this perspective is the words of Vicki Shiran, who made a highly awarded film about children in the Holocaust:

The work on the Holocaust taught me many things about the Ashkenazim, including the great gnawing question: what happened to them, to what extent, what happened to that population, to that large, mighty, and wonderful entity called Judaism, the Ashkenazi Judaism that arrived when its immigrants arrived in the country. What happened? What dreadful split tore us apart that they could do this to us too? How could European Jews who experienced the Holocaust put Mizrahi Jews through this racism?<sup>50</sup>

This ethnic-cultural question could not be answered in her film about children in the Holocaust, which she defined as “my small contribution to the big tears on the subject of the Holocaust.” The critique formulated here,

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<sup>48</sup> H. Yablonka, “Oriental Jewry and the Holocaust,” p. 107.

<sup>49</sup> According to Yablonka, Mizrahi writers contend with the Holocaust by investing it with universal meaning. In my view, Yablonka is oblivious to the strong ethnic implications of their writing. She also refers to them in her article as “Sephardim,” a term unable to convey the anti-hegemonic political distinctiveness of their work and of their social consciousness.

<sup>50</sup> V. Shiran, “Response,” in *Kolot Mizrahiyyim* (ed. G. Abutbul, L. Greenberg, and P. Mutzafi-Haller; Masada, 2005), pp. 120–121.

however, neutralized and balanced the strong impulse to identify unequivocally with the suffering of European Jews. It presented the concern with the Holocaust in the provocative and unfamiliar context of another holocaust, connected to and originating in the national one, which Mizrahim are committed to mention in the same breath.

The Mizrahi appropriation of the Holocaust story in Chetrit's "provocation" is both concrete and metaphorical. By partially adopting the story, he presents Mizrahi historiography in terms borrowed from the national historiography. The subject, however, is not the fate of North African Jews in the 1940s genocide but the emigration and exile experience of Mizrahim in Israel. From a national narrative that blots out ethnic contrasts, the Holocaust turns into a narrative that sharpens these contrasts and defines a unique Mizrahi perspective. The identification with the father and with his Mizrahi history appears both in the symbolic form of a shared sacrifice and as a critical, non-nostalgic effort to attach herself to the repressed story of the immigrant father and correct his representation, although both he himself and his surroundings considered him a failure.

This commitment appears clearly in Hess's later poems:

People who stutter understand  
That the word must be delayed  
Before it bursts forth like a tsunami

...

The clarity of my words will shatter the golden calf  
That the people are casting.

How can I mention my father Yehuda  
Whose personal holocaust  
Is not like the Holocaust of my people?  
Who was not collectively taken with another 6 million  
To the gas chambers, but was amputated from his home?

And all the people see the stuttering.

I undress in honor of the event to give birth to  
The stub of an immigrant's mourning.  
Before you: entrails, long patient pangs of a soul  
That was torn from its life in a faint.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> A. Hess, "People Who Stutter Understand" (Anashim she-megamgemim mevinim), in *The Bulimia of the Soul* (Ha-bulimia shel ha-neshamah; Tel Aviv: Helicon, 2007), p. 31.

Contrary to the hegemonic discourse on the Holocaust (compared here to the golden calf), this poem points to the connection between the public repression of, and the Israeli disinterest in, the “holocaust” of the immigrant from Iraq and the immigrant’s inability to speak for himself and find a language and an audience in these hostile cultural conditions. The intensity of the ethnic history is no less meaningful than the national history at whose center is the Holocaust of European Jewry, although it has become marginal and repressed in a public cultural sense, and concealed in a personal sense. Correcting the exclusion and the rejection means reviving the father’s mourning and the erased part of his identity (the stump, the soul “torn from its life”)—in the shape of his rebirth in the daughter’s body. The analogy between the Holocaust of European Jews and the Mizrahi Holocaust legitimizes the immigrants’ traumatic experience, marked by their estrangement from home and by the denial that pervades life in the shadow of this estrangement. At the same time, it conveys the possibility of correcting the trauma by involving the second generation.

The struggle for the right of those who live on the margins to question the hegemonic narrative of history turns into a struggle over a seemingly surprising question: who is a Jew, that is, what is the perspective for capturing the past and who is worthy of representing its legacy—the Ashkenazi founders of Israel who painstakingly erased their own exilic past and that of others, or the Mizrahi immigrants who took the trouble of putting back the subject of the exile on the cultural agenda?<sup>52</sup> The Jewish topic became political as soon as it was linked to exclusion and to its legitimation mechanisms (“I, the Jew, will not be thought of as a Jew by you, I was not in

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<sup>52</sup> I am aware that Aharon Appelfeld was the first to write consistently about the diaspora and to refuse to give up his a-Zionist perspective. The appearance of Mizrahi writers, particularly since the 1990s, helps to define the fundamental difference between their exilic perspective and that of Appelfeld. Many of Appelfeld’s stories deal with the assimilated Jewish society of Central Europe before the Holocaust, with a few touching on the alienated lives of Holocaust survivors in Israel. These stories refrain from addressing the social and economic exclusion of the survivors, or from formulating a stance of cultural marginality. The erasure of Yiddish or German—the language of these characters—does not turn into a critical statement about the absorbing society, as the depressive passivity of most characters does not turn into a lens for viewing the “melting pot” mechanisms that were also forcefully imposed on immigrants from Europe. By contrast, among Mizrahi writers, the exilic prism entails a decidedly conflictual socio-cultural dimension, revealed in a joint attempt at liberation from the Orientalist stereotypes ascribed to them by the absorbing society but, above all, to offer an alternative to Zionist culture—in the perception of time, space, body, and gender, and in their political and linguistic attitudes. Appelfeld’s writing evolved in the entirely different social conditions of an immigration that found it extremely hard to protest its exclusion and to develop a joint social consciousness of unity and exile. Mizrahi immigration, by contrast, arrived rather early to a sharp awareness of its non-inclusion in the national project, sharpening the sense of alienation underlying its writing. In this sense, Appelfeld was clearly the first and almost the sole writer who turned his attention to the exilic question, but Mizrahi writers radicalized exilic consciousness and expanded it into a socio-cultural layer that transformed it into something else.

Auschwitz”)<sup>53</sup> as well as to Mizrahi opposition to the state as a mechanism that reproduces oppressive relationships. Consequently, “Jew” appears to signify a marginality and a powerlessness that returns the term to its exilic, pre-Zionist denotation. The term “Jew” is interpreted in Mizrahi consciousness in political-cultural terms, denoting alienation from nationalism and association with times and places outside Israel deliberately forgotten and erased from Zionist consciousness:

The heart is hurled here in alien lands  
like an iron wheel.  
Damn that they have made me a Jewess  
and the teardrop between here and there—  
because I’ve never had a place.<sup>54</sup>

Hess describes the experience of a visit to Germany too from the perspective of a Jew without a national home, not from that of an Israeli. The “March of the Living” ceremonies that the Israeli state education track arranges in death camps in Poland intensify the participants’ sense that the creation of the State of Israel ensures that their fate will be very different from that of European Jews in the past. By contrast, Hess emphasizes the historical continuity rather than the truncation, that is, her being still a wandering Jew whose identity is not built and defined by Israel. Her deep and personal identification with Holocaust victims sharply evokes the sense of the Mizrahi Holocaust:

When we were walking in the shadow of death  
I lit a candle in memory of the millions  
...  
I dream of burning  
like a torch candle in memory of myself.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> A. Hess, “The Dung Beetle” (Hipushit ha-zevel), in *The Bulimia of the Soul* (Ha-bulimia shel ha-neshamah; Tel Aviv: Helicon, 2007), p. 45. Shenhav showed the critical and contemptuous attitude that Jewish Agency emissaries to Iraq in the 1940s displayed toward the religiosity of Iraqi Jews (Y. Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*, pp. 73–120). This attitude is no different from that shown toward the Jewishness of Ethiopian immigrants since Operation Moses in 1985. See, for instance, the ironic poem of Esther Shekalim, “At that time” (Oto ma’amad): “And then I understood/ Some of them think/ That my parents/ Were not at Mount Sinai./ Nor were my ancestors./ And my ancestors’ ancestors/ Were still climbing trees in Persia/ For sure./ After all/ They did not think in Yiddish/ and did not follow the laws and statutes of *kneidlach*/ and did not expound on the size of the *shtreiml*” (E. Shekalim, *East Wind* [Sharkyah; Or Yehuda: Kineret, Zmora, Bitan, 2006]).

<sup>54</sup> A. Hess, “In the No-Place” (Be-al makom), in *The Bulimia of the Soul* (Tel Aviv: Helicon, 2007), p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> A. Hess, “In the Church” (Ba-knesyah), in *The Bulimia of the Soul* (Tel Aviv: Helicon, 2007), p. 30.

The association with the Holocaust and its victims—without the mediation of the European Zionist lens but through the exilic perspective of one who experienced another holocaust<sup>56</sup> within the Israeli space and time—sets up a Mizrahi alternative to the hegemonic Holocaust discourse. This alternative subversively re-adopts the image of the wandering exile Jew that Hebrew Zionist culture had always aspired to discard, proving it had been a thing of the past.<sup>57</sup> The Mizrahi consciousness that emerges from repressed experience casts doubt on key concepts of Zionist culture. It exposes a range of options, powerful and still relevant, adapting them to a new context delineated by a Mizrahi history now awakening from a long period of disregard and oblivion.

Another possible option, however, for Mizrahi representation of the Holocaust, appears almost uniquely in Yossi Sucary's book *Emilia* (2002). Sucary notes that the Holocaust did not bypass Libyan Jews. His grandmother, born in Benghazi, was taken together with other Jews to Bergen-Belsen and to this day has a number tattooed on her arm. And yet, his novel is not interested in describing her concentration camp experience or her subsequent immigration to Israel. He simply repeats the claim that the discrimination of Mizrahi Jews in Israel (of which he does not cite many examples) never allowed his grandmother to feel that she belonged to Israeli society. In this context, he also challenges the exclusion of Mizrahim from the official Israeli story about the Holocaust. The Mizrahi Holocaust consciousness he offers is not meant to connect with the national consciousness but actually with an ethnic consciousness. The memory about the Arab neighbor in Benghazi who risked her life and hid the grandmother's children in her home when the Germans were looking for them, helps him to define the Mizrahi imagined community in terms incompatible with the parameters of the national community: "The Arabs treated her a thousand times better than the Jews in Israel.... Jews in Libya were joined to Arabs like Siamese twins."<sup>58</sup> The Jewish-Arab past in Libya, which the Holocaust period con-

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<sup>56</sup> Hess is not the only one to use the term "Holocaust" to describe the Mizrahi experience. The poet Moshe Sartal similarly writes: "I conjure up an entire history ... that great culture of Tajar Judaism—which is Turkey—that has become extinct. True, not in the Holocaust, but in what for them was a kind of Zionist Holocaust that destroyed their entire culture, a culture that brought them to Eretz Israel but left nothing of them. These people were in exile in both a spiritual and a physical sense ... they were saved in the physical sense but died in the cultural one." A. Hess, "On the Road to Beth-El" (Ba-derekh ha-olah Beth-El), *Apiriyon* 1 (1983): 21.

<sup>57</sup> D. Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997); M. Glusman, *The Zionist Body: Nationalism, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007).

<sup>58</sup> Y. Sucary, *Emilia* (Emilia ve-Melakh ha-Aretz: Vidui; Tel-Aviv: Bavel, 2002), pp. 10–11.



veys sharply and vividly, enables him to challenge the national-Zionist use of the Holocaust, to appropriate the Holocaust so as to shape a critical, anti-Zionist Mizrahi consciousness, and to define through it a stance of Mizrahi marginality within Israeli society and culture.

## 6. MIZRAHI IDENTITY AS A MINOR PERSPECTIVE

“A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language: it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language,”<sup>59</sup> that is, a language that carries authority, particularly the language of the country. A minor literature copes with the barrier preventing the minority’s access to the major language because it does not belong to the Israeli Zionist manifestations that this language uses as a tool of oppression and acculturation. It demands changes in the major language, questions its semantic conventions, its narratives and symbols, its hegemonic genres, and its dominant values—a practice that Deleuze and Guattari call “deterritorialization.” This spatial term refers to the creation of “lines of escape” from the defined and official to a variety of other places that are always in external and unstable positions. A literary act of this kind is, above all, a social, political, collective act, not only a private or aesthetic one.<sup>60</sup>

Mizrahi literature exists in a complex dialogue with the canonic culture and offers a minor option. On the one hand, this option rests on the rejection of hegemonic representation (in this case, of the Holocaust), which it identifies with an Ashkenazi culture forcing itself, *inter alia*, on Mizrahim. On the other, it encourages critical use of the hegemony’s contents and concepts, allowing it to broaden its borders to include what had been defined as external or subjected to repression. It can thus move in and out independently to exist on the threshold, between the official and hegemonic space and whatever threatens it.

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<sup>59</sup> G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (trans. D. Polan; Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> David Lloyd restricted Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of the “minor literature” concept and ascribed it exclusively to the writing of ethnic and national minorities within the hegemonic culture. The main characteristic of any literature defined as minor is, according to Lloyd, its distancing from the canon, be it due to aesthetic judgments, or racial or gender discrimination. Its second characteristic is the tendency of this type of literature to develop an attitude of opposition to the canon and to the country from which it has been distanced, in the sense that it must question the very concepts used to define canonic literary works. A minor literature is usually opposed to the creation of identity narratives (national, ethnic, gender) typical of the hegemonic literature. See D. Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 20–21.

Criticism of the Holocaust representation in Israel, which unfolded since the 1980s, highlighted mainly the political use of the Holocaust that was intended to fixate what Foucault called “a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies.”<sup>61</sup> Usually, this criticism targeted the perspective of the Israeli public whose experience of the Holocaust, as it were, continues to force it to see the Arabs as an existential danger. Beside claims about the “instrumentalization” of the Holocaust and its transformation into an unquestionably aggressive legacy,<sup>62</sup> recent comments also refer to the erasure of the Mizrahi question by placing the Holocaust consciousness at the focus.<sup>63</sup> Young Mizrahim reject the Holocaust as an Israeli myth (both national and Ashkenazi) that overshadows their own history and forces them to be integrated into a national story. They also reject the writing of first generation authors and their emotional identification with the Holocaust stories of European Jewry, claiming it must come at the expense of their unique Mizrahi standpoint and of a Mizrahi perspective that will transcend the borders of the hegemonic representation. This dual rejection—of hegemonic Ashkenazi fiction<sup>64</sup> and of first-generation Mizrahi writers—is evident in two alternative directions adopted by second-generation Mizrahi writers.

One direction is political-critical. Writers such as Busi, Oz, and Castel-Blum examine both the temptation and the danger threatening Mizrahim who imagine they can become Israelis by adopting accepted (Ashkenazi) models of Israeliness, in which association with the Holocaust plays a crucial role. This political angle views the concern with the Holocaust of European Jewry as a way of blurring the “Mizrahi Holocaust,”<sup>65</sup> and directs

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<sup>61</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (vol. 2 of *The Use of Pleasure*; trans. R. Hurley; New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> M. Zuckermann, *Shoah in the Sealed Room: The “Holocaust” in Israeli Press During the Gulf War* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: author’s publishing, 1993).

<sup>63</sup> For a sharp political formulation, see the following: “I have yet to find a discussion of Mizrahi identity that will not have someone throwing in the Holocaust as a constitutive Ashkenazi myth that, unfortunately, is cited in order to silence the Mizrahi outburst, since the Mizrahim were not at the Holocaust.” See M. Shemoelof, “Mizrahi Identities and Their Representation in Israel” (in Hebrew), July 21, 2004. Online: <http://hagada.org.il/hagada/html/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2484>.

<sup>64</sup> In the writing of second-generation Holocaust survivors, the question of their pertinence to their parents’ Holocaust memories has never been raised. Quite the contrary, their drawing away from the collective memory led to the development of private memory channels. On the fiction of the second-generation, see I. Milner, *Past Present: Biography, Identity, and Memory in Second Generation Literature* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Am Oved and Tel Aviv University, 2003).

<sup>65</sup> For Shimon, a “professional Mizrahi” (meaning someone with an over-politicized Mizrahi consciousness), the term “our Holocaust” refers to Ashkenazi discrimination of Mizrahim in Israel. See D. Busi, *A Noble Savage*, p. 172.

attention to the production of Israeli culture and to Mizrahim who lose their own voice within the hegemonic Holocaust discourse.

The other direction is humanistic-ethnic. Writers such as Hess and Berdugo clarify that the political perspective of the Holocaust as solely an Israeli myth or as a means of cultural control is inadequate, and demand that an additional, complementary viewpoint be considered. This complementary stance views the Holocaust as a necessary basis for understanding the experience of immigration and displacement of both European and Mizrahi Jews. This is an attempt to understand the Mizrahi migration, and particularly the trauma that accompanied it for over a generation, through the metaphor of the Holocaust.

This view clarifies the ambivalent attitude toward the Holocaust: a national device that erases margins, and a humanistic, supra-national viewpoint that focuses on the experience of marginalization and does not allow it to be forgotten. This is also a way for young Mizrahi writers to participate in the Holocaust narrative that, paradoxically, has become the most institutionalized and official representative of the demand for Israeli homogeneity.<sup>66</sup> Although these writers tend to deal with Mizrahi marginality and to refrain from focusing on the Israeli center, they choose not to disregard the Holocaust but, nevertheless, to offer different and independent versions of it—critical and parodic, or empathic. In both cases, the story loses its mythical, national, and one-time character to become part of their separate immigration story and their unique ethnic experience.

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<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, the “March of the Living” supported by the Ministry of Education—an organized tour of high school students to concentration camps in Poland accompanied by senior politicians.